THE WINGS TO AWAKENING

An Anthology from the Pāli Canon

Abridged Edition

Preface — How to Read this Book

Introduction

- The Buddha's Awakening
- The Buddha's Teachings

Part I. Basic Principles

- A. Skillfulness
- B. Kamma and the Ending of Kamma

Preface: How to Read this Book

This anthology is the first to organize the Buddha's teachings around the set the Buddha himself called the heart of his message: the Wings to Awakening (bodhi-pakkhiya-dhamma). An Introduction defines what "Awakening" means by examining the Buddha's own accounts of his enlightenment, with special attention to the principle of skillful kamma — the how and the what of that event. Skillful kamma was how the Buddha reached Awakening, and his understanding of skillful kamma was itself what he awakened to.

The book then works through the seven interlocking sets that make up the Wings: the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, the four bases for power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for Awakening, and the noble eightfold path. Because these sets interconnect in complex ways, no single linear reading fully does them justice. Newcomers may prefer to start with concrete, experience-near material before returning to the more abstract discussions of causal structure; more advanced readers may want to follow the cross-references wherever they lead. The passages translated from the Canon are the primary material; the essays that introduce each section supply doctrinal, historical, and practical context, but are not meant to settle every question the passages raise. Their purpose instead is to model "appropriate attention" (yoniso manasikāra) — the skill of bringing the right questions to a text, which the Buddha treated as more valuable than arriving with ready-made answers.

Three kinds of context inform the essays. Doctrinal context draws mainly on the discourses themselves, on the principle that the Buddha and his disciples are the most reliable interpreters of their own words; a teaching that looks obscure in isolation often clarifies once compared with parallel treatments elsewhere in the Canon. Historical context draws on what the discourses say, directly and indirectly, about the intellectual world of six th-century B.C.E. North India, supplemented by secondary scholarship. And a living, practical context draws on teachings from later and contemporary practice traditions — chiefly the Thai Forest Tradition — offered without attribution, both out of gratitude that resists singling out particular teachers and out of caution that any misunderstanding should not be pinned on them.

A third borrowed term, "holographic," describes a further recurring feature of the material: just as a fragment of a hologram, however small, still yields a recognizable if fuzzy image of the whole object, certain formulations of the path contain a rough version of the entire path complete

within each individual step. Readers unfamiliar with any of these three borrowed vocabularies — phenomenology, chaos theory, holography — may find them clarified by the discussion of skillfulness in Part I, Section A, which grounds each one in a single familiar reference point: the ordinary experience of learning a skill. Phenomenology corresponds to the way the Buddha, on the night of his Awakening, examined the mental process of developing skillful states directly, without assuming any fixed self behind the process; chaos theory corresponds to the feedback patterns he found at work within that process, in which the results of an action become causal inputs into further action; and holography corresponds to his discovery that skillfulness develops by drawing on clusters of already-present good qualities and using them to reinforce one another at every stage.

Two modern vocabularies are used sparingly to make the Buddha's more formal statements intelligible: phenomenology, the philosophical study of experience described just as it presents itself, without assumptions about hidden substrates; and deterministic chaos theory, whose vocabulary of feedback, resonance, and scale invariance usefully describes the non-linear causal patterns the Buddha called this/that conditionality. Neither comparison claims that the Buddha anticipated modern science or philosophy — they are borrowed only because they happen to supply working vocabulary for patterns the Canon describes in its own terms.

Readers should also expect the terse, formulaic, sometimes repetitive style of a teaching passed down orally for roughly five centuries before being written; most repetitions have been trimmed here for readability. Where the texts address "monks," the commentarial tradition understands the term to include any serious practitioner, lay or ordained, of any gender, and that understanding is assumed throughout even though the wording could not always be fully degendered.

Two entry points into the material are worth naming explicitly. A first-time reader gains most by moving straight through from beginning to end, taking the overall framework from the Introduction and Part I before descending into the more granular material that follows; this order matches how the book explains itself, even though it runs opposite to how the practice is actually learned, since a meditator necessarily starts with particular, concrete experiences and only later discovers how they interrelate. A reader who finds the causal analysis too abstract on a first pass may prefer to skip ahead to the more experience-near material and circle back to the framework once it has more to connect to. Either way, because the Wings interlock so thoroughly, no single

pass through the book — including this abridgment — can capture every connection; what follows is meant as an orientation to the whole, not a substitute for it.

Introduction

The Wings to Awakening are the Buddha's own summary of what mattered most in his teaching; he said that as long as they were remembered and practiced, his message would endure. Understanding them well requires first understanding the Awakening from which they came.

The Buddha's Awakening

Prince Siddhattha Gotama grew up in extraordinary comfort — the Canon describes lotus ponds, silk from Vārāṇasī, and palaces built for each season. Yet reflecting on old age, sickness, and death, he recognized that his privilege gave him no exemption from any of them, and that his youthful, healthy pride was unwarranted. In his own words, this recognition caused his intoxication with youth, health, and life to fall away.

> *Why am I, being myself subject to birth, aging, illness, and death, seeking what is subject to the same? What if I were to seek the unborn, unaging, undying security from bondage: Unbinding.* — MN 26

He left the household life to become a homeless wanderer — one of many contemplatives (samaṇas) of his era who questioned the ritual authority of the Vedas and sought a life "in tune" with the actual laws of nature rather than with social convention. Prince Siddhattha lived in an aristocratic republic in a period of real social upheaval: a monetary economy was displacing the older agrarian order, absolute monarchies allied with a rising merchant class were absorbing the old aristocracies, and, as often happens when an established elite loses ground, people across society had begun questioning inherited beliefs and looking to new sources of knowledge for a replacement world-view. The leading science of the age was astronomy; newly precise tracking of the planets, combined with new methods of calculation, convinced astronomers that time unfolds in vast, endlessly repeating aeons, and philosophers spent enormous effort working out what such a timescale implied for the pursuit of happiness.

These philosophers split broadly into Vedic thinkers, who reasoned within the orthodox ritual tradition, and the unorthodox Samaṇas, who did not. They disagreed sharply on two questions. The first was whether personal identity survives death: most assumed some form of survival across the cosmic cycle, though they disputed whether the surviving identity stays the same or changes from life to life, and whether the prospect of endless rebirth was worth welcoming or

simply a trap to escape — except for one materialist school, the Lokāyatans, who denied survival altogether and counseled sensual indulgence in the time available. The second question was how action shapes the future. Most schools agreed that action mattered, but disagreed sharply on the mechanism: some Vedists trusted ritual action above all; the Jains taught that all action fell under a strict, linear, physical law, in which action itself deposited sticky "effluents" on the soul, escapable only through non-violence and, ultimately, slow starvation; some Upanishadic texts described causality as morally neutral evolution, others as morally weighted and built into nature itself. Opposing all of these, the Lokāyatans held that nothing is really caused at all, so moral rules could be safely ignored, while a further school, the Ājīvakas, split into a wing that considered causality illusory (because the only real things were unchanging elemental substances) and a wing of astrological fatalists who considered causality real but wholly predetermined, leaving only patient waiting for one's fate to unwind like a ball of string. Every one of these pre-Buddhist positions, however they differed, assumed that causality — where it operated at all — worked in a straightforwardly linear way. The Buddha's Awakening, examined below, broke with that shared assumption and can be read as his own resolution of both disputes at once.

After trying and rejecting several approaches — including formless absorption and extreme austerity — Gotama found success by steadying the mind on the breath in the present moment and observing the workings of his own mind directly. Seeing these processes as inconstant, stressful, and not-self, he stopped identifying with them, and what remained, beyond time and space, was Deathlessness. The Buddha later summarized the Awakening as two knowledges: knowledge of "the regularity of the Dhamma" — the causal principle underlying all conditioned experience — followed by knowledge of Unbinding, the freedom that comes from disbanding that causal process altogether. The image behind the term Unbinding (nibbāna, literally the "extinguishing" of a fire) reflects the ancient view that a dying flame does not vanish but simply releases its grip on fuel — a picture of freedom through letting go, not of annihilation.

Descriptions of the first knowledge center on three insights reached over the three watches of the Awakening night: recollection of many past lives; direct sight of how other beings die and are reborn according to the quality of their kamma; and — the insight unique to the Buddha's path — the ending of the mental effluents (āsava). The first two insights are shared, in some form, with other contemplative and shamanic traditions; the third went further, into a systematic phenomenology of the mind that became the distinctive core of the Buddhist path.

The first two insights — memory of one's own past lives, and direct sight of other beings' rebirth according to their kamma — were not, the Introduction notes, unique to the Buddhist tradition; shamanic traditions in many cultures report similar claims. What was unique to the Buddha's Awakening was the third insight, which pushed past shamanic vision into a systematic phenomenology of the mind: a disciplined, first-person account of how experience is actually put together, moment by moment, rather than a report of what a seer happens to perceive. Because this third insight is multi-faceted, the Canon describes it from several different angles depending on context, and the outline given here traces only one thread through it — the thread that runs through the principle of skillful kamma.

Taken together, the three insights answered the two disputed questions that had launched the young prince's quest in the first place. On survival, the first insight showed that death is not annihilation, but also that no fixed, unchanging core carries over unaltered from one life to the next — one life follows another the way a dream follows a dream, with the same disorienting shifts of identity, which is itself part of why endless rebirth offers no inherent security worth clinging to. On causality, the second insight located the decisive factor in the moral quality of mind — its intentions and the views informing them — rather than in ritual correctness or blind cosmic fate, meaning moral distinctions are woven into the structure of experience itself rather than laid over it by social convention. And the third insight showed that escape from the round lay neither in ritual nor in willed inaction, but in a disciplined, refinable kind of right view — one that passed, over the course of the Awakening itself, through three successive stages of compression: first the four noble truths, then dependent co-arising, and finally the barest formulation of all, this/that conditionality.

Reflecting afterward on kamma, the Bodhisatta concluded — against both Vedic ritualism and Jain physicalism — that kamma is essentially mental: an act's quality is set by the intention behind it, informed by attention and perception, rather than by the physical act alone. He examined this by treating the very refinement of his own concentration and discernment as the kamma under observation. Noticing that every skill-building process assumes causes really do produce results, and that some results are better than others, he arrived at a four-part structure — condition, favorable, unfavorable, together with their combinations — that became the four noble truths: stress, its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, each carrying its own task (to be comprehended, abandoned, realized, or developed).

He further saw that the round of kamma, result, and reaction was not something binding the mind from outside, as the Jains held; it was the round of rebirth itself, and the only truly binding element within it was an optional reaction — craving and clinging — layered onto the results of past action. Kamma is intention; its result is feeling; the reaction to feeling, when clouded by ignorance, becomes craving and clinging, which condition new intention and keep the cycle going. Because this reactive layer is optional, it can be abandoned through refined attention and intention — that is, through concentration and discernment, the central qualities of the path.

As the coarser forms of craving fell away, only the acts of concentration and discernment themselves remained to be examined, and analysis narrowed to the barest possible terms for present experience — "this" and "that." This yielded the classic formula of this/that conditionality: mutual presence ("when this is, that is; when this isn't, that isn't") paired with temporal dependence ("from the arising of this comes the arising of that"). When even this refined level of concentration and discernment was let go, a state called non-fashioning arose in which the mind contributed no further present input to experience; with no input to sustain it, the fabricated round of time and the present simply disbanded, opening onto the Unfabricated — the very happiness Gotama, now the Buddha, had set out to find.

It is worth stressing what this account leaves out as much as what it includes. The Buddha himself compared everything he had directly realized on the night of his Awakening to the leaves of an entire forest, and everything he chose to teach to a mere handful of leaves picked up from the forest floor — the rest, he said, would have served no purpose in helping others reach the same goal. What survives in the Canon is therefore already a deliberate selection, shaped from the start by the practical aim of leading others to Awakening rather than by any wish to record the Awakening exhaustively. Keeping this in mind guards against two opposite errors: treating the recorded teaching as an incomplete sketch badly in need of outside supplementation, and treating it as a complete metaphysical system whose every implication should be logically extracted. It is neither; it is a curated toolkit, and the appropriate question to bring to any part of it is not "is this the whole truth" but "how is this meant to be used."

It is worth noting, finally, how the two knowledges of the Awakening night relate to each other in terms of authority. Knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma is the describable part of the Awakening — the part that can be put into words, taught, and tested by others. Knowledge of Unbinding, though indescribable, is what actually underwrites the first knowledge's worth: only

someone who has directly tasted total freedom from stress can vouch, from firsthand experience, that mastering the causal pattern truly leads where it claims to lead. This is why the Buddha could present a describable, teachable doctrine and yet insist that the doctrine's ultimate justification lay beyond what any description could capture — a distinction worth holding onto through the more technical passages that follow, since it clarifies why the Buddha treats "true knowledge" less as correspondence to abstract fact and more as the ability to skillfully bring about a specific, verifiable result.

The Buddha's Teachings

For forty-nine days after the Awakening, the Buddha reviewed its implications before deciding to teach; he judged, after surveying the minds of others, that some listeners would be able to understand. His decision was shaped by the same two knowledges that constituted the Awakening. Knowledge of Unbinding was the point of teaching at all — the Buddha wanted others to reach the same freedom — while knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma supplied the guidelines for what could usefully be communicated so that listeners could reach that freedom on their own.

Of the three insights, only the third — ending the effluents, achieved by mastering causality — proved strictly necessary for every listener; the other two supplied background. This/that conditionality can be understood as two causal principles working together: a linear principle connecting events over time, and a synchronic principle connecting objects and events within a given moment. Together they generate genuine complexity without total determinism — every act has both immediate and long-delayed repercussions, which can reinforce, coexist indifferently with, or cancel one another, and because both principles converge on the mind, feedback loops arise as the mind reacts to the results of its own past reactions, sometimes intensifying (as in a howling speaker feedback loop) and sometimes self-correcting (as in a thermostat).

This dual structure explains several features of the Buddha's teaching career at once. It explains how the Buddha survived his own Awakening to teach at all: because the pattern is not purely synchronic, old kamma continued to work itself out over the remainder of his life even after new kamma had stopped being generated. It explains why teaching was necessary in the first place: the sheer complexity of this/that conditionality leaves most people bewildered, driving them to

unskillful strategies — magic, ritual, revenge, denial, repression — in the effort to escape suffering. It explains why teaching could succeed: because the system allows causal input from the present moment, effort in the here and now genuinely matters, and because the principle is impersonal, anyone who cultivates the same qualities of heedfulness and ardency can reach the same result. And it explains the sheer variety of the Buddha's explanations of causality across the discourses: a system with many feedback loops requires many entry points, so different listeners caught at different junctures needed different, equally valid analyses — not a single canonical account that other analyses merely approximate.

The content of the teaching follows from the same insight: the causal factors at work in the cosmos are the same factors at work in each mind's processing of experience, so freedom is to be found here and now, in the direct scrutiny of present experience, using the proper frame of reference, the proper quality of awareness, and the proper mode of analysis — precisely the material organized in the Wings to Awakening.

Because listeners were themselves embedded in webs of past kamma and present attitude, and because mastering this/that conditionality is necessarily a first-person task that no one can do on another's behalf, the Buddha needed to earn trust before he could be followed. He did this through demonstrated character, occasional displays of psychic power, and — his most typical method — patient reasoning that led listeners step by step from what they could already see (the immediate rewards of generosity and virtue) toward increasingly subtle points (the drawbacks of even pleasant results, and finally the benefits of renunciation). Reason here served not to prove the teaching in advance — proof was available only through Awakening itself — but to make it intelligible by relating it to what listeners already understood. Trust built this way, called "going for refuge," is what distinguishes a Buddhist from someone merely curious about Buddhism, and it functioned as a working hypothesis to be tested progressively in practice, with full confirmation coming only at Awakening.

A further consequence of this/that conditionality's non-linearity concerns effort itself. Because causal systems with several interacting feedback loops (in the vocabulary of modern chaos theory) can shift rapidly between apparent order and apparent chaos depending on small, well-placed changes in input, a merely abstract description of the system would be of little practical use — the complexity would overwhelm the listener, and the system's own instability would date any fixed description quickly. What the situation calls for instead is a reliable map of the

system's most sensitive points, together with guidance on how to work them skillfully from within. This is exactly the function the Buddha designed his teachings to serve, and it is why the vocabulary of skillful and unskillful thought, word, and deed sits at the very center of the teaching rather than at its periphery.

It also follows that the Buddha never intended his teachings to be received as a closed metaphysical system valued simply for being true. He regularly declined to answer certain classic metaphysical questions — whether the self exists, whether the cosmos is eternal or finite — not because the questions were unanswerable in principle but because answering them would not help anyone toward release, and could positively distract from the task at hand. Even the teachings he did affirm as true, he treated as skillful means to be used and then set down once their work was done, in the same way a raft is abandoned, not clung to, after it has carried its passenger across a flood. This is also why he cautioned against abandoning the practice prematurely in a show of non-attachment: a raft let go in mid-river drowns its passenger just as surely as one carried needlessly on dry land. Even skillfulness itself, on this view, is eventually to be transcended — but only after being brought to full completion, never before.

A further structural difficulty shaped how the Buddha presented his teaching: no single explanation could work equally well for every listener, since listeners differed both in the past kamma shaping their present capacities and in their present attitudes. A person whose difficult past kamma made Awakening unlikely in this lifetime might still benefit from a more elementary teaching that improved their prospects going forward; another person might already be well positioned for Awakening in this very life but need a shift in present attitude before being willing to hear the teaching at all. This variability, layered on top of the variability already built into this/that conditionality itself, helps explain why the Canon preserves so many differently pitched versions of what remains, at bottom, a single teaching, rather than one uniform presentation meant to fit every listener equally well.

As the Buddha's teaching career lengthened and its explanations multiplied to suit many audiences, he increasingly distilled an unadorned, timeless core — material simple enough to memorize, precise enough not to mislead, and framed in terms of immediate mental experience rather than abstract doctrine. This core took the form of seven interlocking lists of mental qualities, described in the Introduction as seven equivalent but distinctively-angled routes to the same realization, suited to listeners caught at different points in the causal web. Because the lists

point to qualities directly present, however faintly, in every mind, they invite the listener to use them as tools for self-examination rather than as an external system to be believed.

These seven sets are traditionally presented together as Table I of the anthology, reproduced here in condensed form so that later references to "the seven sets" have a fixed point of orientation:

Set	**Members**
1. Four frames of reference	Body, feelings, mind, mental qualities
2. Four right exertions	Prevent, abandon, develop, maintain (unskillful / skillful states)
3. Four bases for power	Desire, persistence, intent, discrimination
4. Five faculties	Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment
5. Five strengths	The same five, developed to the point of being unshakable
6. Seven factors for Awakening	Mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, equanimity
7. Noble eightfold path	Right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration

Each list, when its implications are fully worked out, is said to be equivalent to all the others in its effect, even though each approaches the practice from a distinctive angle — so that a practitioner drawn more naturally to one list is not thereby following an inferior path, only a differently angled entry into the same territory.

Alongside the seven lists, the Buddha established a monastic order (governed by the Vinaya) to preserve the teaching across generations and to provide a living environment — for both monastics and supportive laypeople — conducive to practicing it. Dhamma and Vinaya meet in their shared concern with intention: the Vinaya's rules sensitize practitioners to intention in everyday conduct, and the Dhamma builds on that sensitivity toward Awakening. When the Buddha eventually passed into total Unbinding, he left behind, not a continuing personal presence, but a complete Dhamma-Vinaya — his considered final gift, and a demonstration that the goal of the path needs no further justification than the freedom it offers.

Part I. Basic Principles

A. Skillfulness

Where his contemporaries typically reasoned downward from grand cosmological theories to human experience, the Buddha started from something ordinary and directly verifiable: that a skill can be learned. Theories of rigid cosmic order held that human effort and knowledge make no real difference to how things unfold; the opposing Lokāyata view held that nothing is caused at all, so action carries no real consequence either way. The Buddha sidestepped the whole dispute by noticing that adherents on both sides kept right on acting purposefully — which only makes sense if some approaches really do work better than others. Treating knowledge itself as a skill rather than as a body of settled facts, he followed the implications of ordinary skill-development all the way to Awakening.

Developing any skill assumes two things: that actions really produce results, and that some results are genuinely preferable to others. It further assumes that mistakes are correctable — that the cycle of action and result is not wholly fixed, so that attention and intention can feed new, better input into future action. Mastering a skill requires attention to three things at once: the conditions one starts from, the action performed in light of those conditions, and the results that follow — a threefold monitoring loop that, worked out fully, yields the non-linear pattern the Buddha called this/that conditionality.

The first lesson of skillfulness is that an action's essence lies in the intention behind it: the same outward deed motivated by greed, aversion, or delusion yields different results than one motivated by their opposites. Intention is shaped by attention, which is more or less clouded by delusion; together they shape feeling and outward events, which give rise to perceptions, which in turn shape the next act of attention — the basic cycle underlying the Buddha's teaching on dependent co-arising. Simply trying to force the cycle to stop by an act of will does not work, since the willing itself becomes one more link in the chain; instead, cultivating each factor of the cycle to its most skillful possible pitch allows consciousness's contact with the cycle to fall away naturally. The Buddha called the most skillful form of attention the four noble truths, the most skillful form of intention the thoughts that lead to mental absorption, and the most refined feeling and perception the pleasure and equanimity found in the highest levels of that absorption — all of which reappear as factors of the noble eightfold path.

These implications of skillfulness are not confined to Part I; they recur throughout the seven sets. The qualities of equanimity, concentration, and discernment that anchor the Wings all follow directly from what is required to develop any skill well, and the remaining qualities in each list follow indirectly, as supports for these three. Because this/that conditionality is itself non-linear, the factors within each set do not simply stack in a fixed sequence but reinforce one another in a genuine feedback pattern — persistence sharpens mindfulness, mindfulness steadies concentration, steadier concentration in turn sharpens discernment, and refined discernment redirects persistence more skillfully still. Recognizing this mutual, looping support is part of what it means to understand the Wings as a single interconnected teaching rather than as seven separate curricula.

A useful comparison, deliberately used throughout the discourses, is with musical training. As Prince Siddhattha would have known, a performer of the time first tuned the instrument's tonic note and then fine-tuned the remaining notes in relation to it, before taking up the theme of a composition — a word covering both the piece's core impression and the principle governing what elaboration would suit it. This vocabulary of tuning and theme recurs throughout the Buddha's meditation instructions, and the comparison brings out three practical points: first, that a competent musician needs command of several valid tuning systems while also knowing which tunings simply will not work — likewise the seven sets of the Wings are complete, workable systems, and paths outside them are not; second, that meditative balance calls for a middle course between excess energy and excess slackness, as a taut string can be too sharp and a loose one too flat; and third, that the goal, like consummate musicianship, is eventually reached effortlessly, though the effortlessness itself is only reached through sustained effort — a point that resolves the apparent tension between the texts that stress effort and the rarer texts that describe attainment as effortless.

A further practical implication of the musical comparison concerns the relationship between effort and its eventual disappearance. Certain passages describe reaching the goal without effort, and read on their own these can seem to contradict the many other passages that stress how much sustained effort the path demands. The comparison to musicianship dissolves the apparent contradiction: an accomplished performer eventually plays without visible strain, but that very effortlessness is the product, not the negation, of years of demanding practice. In the same way, the mind on the path develops skillfulness to the point where it operates with increasing ease, without that later ease implying that the earlier effort was ever optional.

Ultimately, the path is a meta-skill: the skill of becoming skillful, applied first to unskillful states of mind, then to skillful ones, and finally to the very process of acquiring skill, until one sees what lies beyond skillfulness altogether.

It is also worth being explicit about what grounds the distinction between skillful and unskillful in the first place, since the Buddha's definition sidesteps two common but ultimately unworkable alternatives. It does not rest the distinction on the standards of any particular society, which vary from place to place and era to era, and it does not require settling the separate question of whether human beings are inherently good or inherently flawed. Instead, unskillful conduct is explained simply as a lack of skill in how one thinks — when thinking is clear and undistorted by greed, aversion, or delusion, good conduct follows naturally, whereas confused or clouded thinking produces harmful conduct more or less automatically, regardless of the underlying character of the person doing the thinking. Because skill can always be acquired, however badly someone may have behaved in the past, the possibility of a fresh start is never permanently foreclosed to anyone.

Two further points deserve emphasis. First, the standard of what counts as "skillful" — freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion — is a genuinely useful test precisely because good intentions and skillful intentions are not automatically the same thing. A well-meaning act carried out in ignorance of its actual effects is good but not necessarily skillful, so ongoing, honest observation of one's own actions and their real consequences remains necessary even for someone acting with entirely benevolent intent. Second, framing the difference between good and evil conduct as a difference in skill rather than as a difference in inherent human nature keeps the path open to absolutely everyone, no matter their past. The Canon records the case of King Ajātasattu, who had killed his own father to seize the throne; when he confessed the deed to the Buddha, the Buddha neither excused it nor dwelt on the king's guilt, but affirmed that recognizing a mistake as a mistake, and resolving not to repeat it, is itself real progress. No one, on this view, is permanently disqualified from developing skillfulness.

The Buddha reached this whole framework by deliberately refusing both of the dominant intellectual postures of his day. Theories of rigid cosmic order, echoing the astronomy that was the prestige science of the period, pictured the universe as a set of discrete bodies obeying fixed linear laws entirely indifferent to human knowledge or effort; various schools then disagreed only about how a soul, conceived either as a discrete substance or as an abstract principle, might

escape so vast and impersonal a machine. The opposing Lokāyata position was a reaction against exactly this picture — a theory of pure chance defined mainly by what it denied, admitting the physical world but denying that any causal law meaningfully governs human-scale events at all, so that personal identity was reduced to a temporary, purely accidental arrangement of bodily elements that simply stops when the arrangement comes apart. The Buddha's own method was to bypass the content of both positions and look instead at what their proponents actually did: since adherents of even the most deterministic or the most chaotic theory kept acting purposefully — arguing their case, trying to persuade opponents, distinguishing better reasoning from worse — their own conduct already presupposed that some ways of approaching truth work better than others, which is the one premise both sides, despite themselves, held in common.

Two conditions make it possible to tell skillful from unskillful in the first place: an internal factor, "appropriate attention" — learning to view one's own thoughts and their real consequences without partiality — and an external factor, association with admirable people, meaning people who themselves live by the principle of kamma and can both teach its advisability and demonstrate it in action. These two reinforce one another: a mind already inclined toward skillfulness seeks out admirable company, and admirable company, by word and by example, makes the less obvious benefits of skillfulness visible. Because every person retains some skillful qualities and some access to admirable influence, the Buddha held that no one beginning the practice starts entirely from zero.

Selected Passages

The Buddha describes, before his Awakening, sorting his thoughts into two classes — those tinged by sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, and those tinged by renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness — and noticing that whichever class he kept pursuing became the settled inclination of his mind, much as a cowherd must actively restrain cattle that stray into a neighbor's ripening crop but can relax once the crop is safely gathered in.

> *Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking and pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness.* — MN 19

Questioned by the skeptical Kālāmas of Kesaputta, who complained that rival teachers all claimed exclusive truth, the Buddha told them not to rely on report, tradition, scripture, or logical inference alone, but to test claims directly: does greed, when it arises, lead to one's own welfare

or to harm? Having reasoned through greed, aversion, and delusion in this way, the Kālāmas concluded for themselves that these qualities are unskillful, blameworthy, criticized by the wise, and productive of harm — and that their opposites are skillful, praiseworthy, and productive of welfare.

> *When you know for yourselves that these qualities are unskillful... you should abandon them.* — AN 3:65

Elsewhere the Buddha defines the unskillful compactly as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive and abusive speech, idle chatter, covetousness, ill will, and wrong view — rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion — with the skillful as their straightforward opposites, rooted in the absence of the same three.

He insists that both abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful are genuinely possible and genuinely beneficial, which is precisely why he urges his listeners to do both — he would not ask for what could not be done, nor urge what would not lead to benefit and ease.

> *See evil as evil. Having seen evil as evil, become disenchanted there, dispassionate there, released.* — Iti 39

The often-cited Discourse to the Kālāmas is sometimes read as a simple charter of free inquiry, unmoored from any outside authority, but this misses one of its own key clauses: the Buddha explicitly tells the Kālāmas to weigh what the wise praise and censure, since until Awakening one's own perceptions remain partial and biased. Independent testing and reliance on admirable company are meant to work together, not as alternatives.

The interaction between the two conditions for skillfulness — appropriate attention and admirable friendship — is well illustrated in the Buddha's instruction to his own young son, given not long after the Awakening. Rāhula had been born just before Prince Siddhattha left the household life, and the instruction shows very concretely how appropriate attention is built: by reflecting on the likely consequences of an action before undertaking it, checking the action's actual effects while it is underway, and reviewing those effects honestly once it is finished. A mistake discovered after the fact is not simply to be regretted in private; it is to be confessed to an experienced companion on the path, both so that one can benefit from their counsel and so that one's resolve not to repeat the mistake becomes a matter of public record rather than private

intention alone. In this way, even though each person must walk the path individually, no one need rely solely on their own untested judgment along the way.

Instructing his young son Rāhula, the Buddha compares bodily, verbal, and mental action to a mirror: one should reflect before acting (would this cause harm?), during the action (is it in fact causing harm?), and afterward (did it cause harm?) — confessing and resolving to avoid repeating any action found harmful, and, when an action proves harmless, continuing in it with a glad and unburdened mind. Every contemplative of the past, present, and future who purified conduct, the Buddha tells Rāhula, did so through exactly this repeated reflection.

> *Phenomena are preceded by the heart, ruled by the heart, made of the heart. If you speak or act with a corrupted heart, then suffering follows you — as the wheel of the cart follows the track of the ox that pulls it.* — Dhp 1

B. Kamma and the Ending of Kamma

If Part I, Section A establishes that skillful action is possible at all, Section B asks what follows once that possibility is taken seriously all the way to its logical end. The word kamma means, quite simply, "action" — but the Buddha's analysis of it turns a commonsense idea into the organizing principle of the entire path, and the passages gathered here are best read as progressively deeper answers to a single question: if action really does shape experience, exactly how does it do so, and how far can that shaping be pushed toward genuine freedom?

The Buddha's teaching on kamma takes the everyday fact of skillful action and gives it cosmic weight: rightly developed, it is not merely one contributor to happiness among others but the primary factor, capable at its most refined of leading to a release altogether beyond time and the present. This claim cannot be proven before Awakening; it functions as a working hypothesis, tested progressively and confirmed fully only with the first taste of Awakening (stream-entry) — which is why serious practice requires a genuine, sustained aspiration for release.

The doctrine's basic context comes from the first two insights of the Awakening night — memory of past lives, and direct sight of other beings' death and rebirth according to their kamma. Together these established that rebirth is real, that its circumstances trace back to the moral quality of past intention, and that moral standards are therefore built into the workings of the cosmos rather than being mere social convention. Crucially, the Buddha located the moral

weight of an act in the mind behind it — intention, informed by attention and perception — rather than in the physical deed alone, collapsing any hard boundary between "mental" and "physical" causation.

A fuller picture, however, requires the third insight as well: the discovery, in the very process of ending kamma, of a fourth kind of kamma beyond good, bad, and mixed — kamma skillful enough to end the kammic round itself. Pursuing this fourth kind forced the Buddha to set aside the ordinary frameworks of personal narrative (this-life-to-that-life storytelling) and cosmology (being and non-being, self and other), since questions framed in those terms — was the agent of the act the same person as the one who experiences its result, or someone else, or both, or neither? — have no answer that does not either bind the experiencer to the act or excuse them from responsibility for it. He turned instead to what he called "entry into emptiness," a mode of observation, resembling what modern philosophy calls radical phenomenology, that tracks only the arising and passing of events — stress, its origin, its cessation, the path to its cessation — without asking whether any entity underlies them.

One further feature of this/that conditionality deserves separate mention: scale invariance, a property non-linear systems commonly display, in which the pattern of behavior visible at a small, easily observed scale turns out to match the pattern at much larger, harder-to-observe scales. Applied to kamma, this is why the Buddha could treat the immediate, close-up study of a single mind developing skillfulness as sufficient grounds for insight that ultimately extended across the vast reaches of the cosmos and of time — a meditator does not need to survey the whole cosmic process directly in order to master it, only to observe its workings faithfully at the one scale genuinely available for observation: the present moment, in one's own mind.

Analyzed this way, kamma is regular without being rigidly deterministic. This/that conditionality means that any given result reflects both old kamma and kamma being made right now, so that while broad patterns hold — habitual unskillful action tends toward unfavorable results, habitual skillful action toward favorable ones — no simple one-to-one, tit-for-tat prediction is possible for any single case; the full web of interaction is, the Buddha says, literally imponderable to speculate about. This is not the same as saying results are arbitrary: when an action is of a kind that will be felt in a particular way, that is how it will in fact be felt. Because kamma is not the only causal factor operating — old kamma works itself out through, rather than overriding, ordinary physical causes such as illness — a serious pain need not always trace to a specific past

misdeed. And because kamma allows present input, the process is not wholly closed to change, which is exactly what makes possible the fourth, ending, kind of kamma: the deliberate cultivation of the seven factors for Awakening and the noble eightfold path.

It is worth pausing on how sharply this departs from the Jain picture the young Bodhisatta had inherited from the intellectual climate of his time. For the Jains, kamma was a physical residue, literally deposited on the soul by violent or careless action, and escape meant winding the process down through strict non-violence and, in the extreme case, deliberate starvation. The Buddha's mature analysis relocates the entire mechanism to the mind: what binds is not a physical residue clinging to a soul-substance, but a specific mental reaction — craving and clinging arising in the presence of ignorance — layered onto the feeling that follows from an act. Because the binding factor is mental rather than physical, and reactive rather than automatic, it is something that can, in principle, simply not arise; no amount of physical asceticism is either necessary or sufficient on its own. This is one of the clearest places where the phenomenological cast of the Buddha's Awakening reshaped a question he inherited from his surrounding culture into a question with a genuinely different, and genuinely workable, answer.

The teaching on dependent co-arising fills in the mechanism: the whole of experienced existence reduces to what is directly present to awareness — the five aggregates and the six sense media — with kamma, clinging, becoming, and birth accounting for the realm into which one is born, and the mutual dependency of name-and-form with consciousness accounting for the survival of the individual organism within it. Crucially, when ignorance of the four noble truths is present, the feeling that results from kamma gives rise to craving, clinging, and renewed becoming, which condition further kamma — a feedback loop that keeps the round turning. End the ignorance, and feeling no longer breeds craving; end craving, and there is no further becoming to provide a home for new kamma. This is why mastering the fourth kind of kamma depends on discernment of the four noble truths specifically.

The truth of this whole analysis, the Buddha held, was proven experientially: when skillfulness was carried to full consummation it issued in a state of non-fashioning, beyond which all experience of the cosmos fell away; and when experience resumed, it was seen to consist entirely of the results of old kamma, with nothing left over from any other source — evidence that kamma is not merely one influence on experience but the necessary condition for it. Having reached this understanding through radical, phenomenological attention to the present moment,

the Buddha remained free afterward to use narrative and cosmological language as well, now purely as a skillful means: vivid teachings on the immensity of past suffering, or cosmological accounts of the rise and fall of worlds through collective kamma, function not as literal metaphysics to be picked apart but as motivation, aimed at turning the listener back toward the one thing that actually matters — mastering the process here and now.

This is also why conviction in kamma remains indispensable to the path even though the Buddha discouraged blind acceptance. Beginners are asked only to test the basic principle for themselves, on a trial basis, noting the connection between skillful intention and favorable result; the effects are not always immediate, which is precisely why patience — and some working trust — is required at the outset. As practice deepens, the actual felt results of increasingly skillful action provide their own steadily accumulating confirmation, sufficient to sustain the far greater exertion needed to uproot the subtler forms of clinging, especially views about self and identity, that keep the round of rebirth turning. It is entirely possible to draw real, positive benefit from portions of the practice — a steadier, calmer daily life from mindfulness or concentration alone — without any settled conviction in kamma at all; what such practice cannot do, on the Buddha's account, is carry a person past that point to the deeper renunciation the full path requires, since that further step depends on a degree of patience and commitment that only genuine conviction can sustain.

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Having reached Unbinding through this radically present-focused, phenomenological mode of attention, the Buddha remained free afterward to move back into ordinary narrative and cosmological speech without being trapped by its assumptions, and he used both extensively to

move listeners, step by step, toward the phenomenological mode itself. One such passage invites listeners to compare the tears they have shed over countless lifetimes of loss and separation to the water of the four great oceans, and concludes that the tears are the greater measure — a teaching aimed less at settling any metaphysical question than at producing enough dismay with the round of rebirth to motivate release from it. Cosmological discourses describing the rise and fall of world-systems, or the various heavens and hells into which kamma can lead, serve the same rhetorical purpose: they are not meant to be mined for a systematic metaphysics, and doing so, the Buddha's approach implies, actually obstructs the path rather than clarifying it. The right way to read them is to ask what they imply about the urgency of mastering one's own present kamma — not what they claim about the ultimate nature of self or cosmos.

Selected Passages

> *Beings are owners of kamma, heir to kamma, born of kamma, related through kamma, and have kamma as their arbitrator.* — MN 135

This discourse works systematically through pairs of contrasting habits and their corresponding results — killing versus non-harming and short versus long life; cruelty versus kindness and sickliness versus health; irritability versus patience and ugliness versus beauty; envy versus generosity of spirit and little versus great authority; stinginess versus giving and poverty versus wealth; arrogance versus respectfulness and low versus high birth; incuriosity versus the habit of inquiring into skillful and unskillful action, and weak versus keen discernment — presenting kamma as the factor that differentiates beings' fortunes.

Asked to define kamma comprehensively, the Buddha identifies intention itself as kamma, contact as its trigger, and traces its diversity across the various realms of possible rebirth; its results may ripen immediately, later in the same life, or in a life beyond that; and its cessation is defined, simply, as the noble eightfold path.

A vivid simile illustrates why the very same unskillful act can ripen very differently in different people: a pinch of salt stirred into a small cup of water makes it undrinkably salty, while the same pinch dropped into the river Ganges leaves it unchanged — the difference lying not in the deed but in the size and development of the mind receiving its result.

Questioned on whether every feeling traces strictly to past kamma, the Buddha lists ordinary physical causes recognized by the medicine of his day — imbalance of bodily humors, weather,

poor bodily care, accident — alongside kammic causes, and states plainly that anyone claiming feeling is entirely and only the result of prior kamma has overstepped what is actually known.

A comparison the Introduction offers is worth repeating here: the relationship between a simple kammic principle and its endlessly intricate working-out resembles the relationship between a simple mathematical equation and the Mandelbrot set it generates — a boundary of famously inexhaustible complexity produced from a rule that can be stated in a single line. The basic premise of kamma is just as simple to state (skillful intention tends toward favorable results, unskillful intention toward unfavorable ones), but the actual unfolding of any particular case, shaped by the full interplay of past and present causes, is intricate enough that the Buddha explicitly declined to encourage speculation about it in detail, listing the precise results of kamma among a short set of topics — alongside the range of a Buddha's own powers and the range of powers available in deep meditative absorption — that lead only to confusion and frustration if pursued analytically rather than practically.

Elaborating this further, the Buddha rejects two extreme readings of kamma at once. Against the view that every result must be felt in exact proportion to the deed that caused it — a view that, he says, would leave no room at all for the holy life to make any difference — he holds instead that the result depends on the context in which the deed is embedded, above all on the developed or undeveloped state of the person's virtue, concentration, and discernment at the time. A trifling wrong committed by someone whose mind is "restricted" and "small-hearted" can carry disproportionate weight, whereas the identical trifling wrong committed by someone whose mind is "developed" and "large-hearted" may barely register.

> *A trifling evil act done by one individual takes him to hell; the very same sort of act, done by another individual, is felt in the here and now, and for the most part barely appears at all.* — AN 3:99

Questioned directly on whether every feeling is entirely caused by what was done before, the Buddha lists ordinary physical causes recognized by the medicine of his day — imbalance of bile, phlegm, or wind; the changing of the seasons; uneven care of the body; sheer accident — alongside kammic causes, and states that anyone who reduces all feeling to past kamma alone has overstepped both common experience and common agreement.

Asked to define "old kamma" precisely, the Buddha identifies it with the six sense faculties themselves — eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind — each described as "fabricated and willed, capable of being felt"; "new kamma" is simply whatever one does now, in body, speech, or mind; and the cessation of kamma is defined once again as the noble eightfold path.

The Buddha distinguishes four types of kamma: black kamma yielding a black (painful) result, white kamma yielding a white (pleasant) result, mixed kamma yielding a mixed result, and — crucially — kamma that is neither black nor white, yielding neither result, which leads to the ending of kamma altogether. This fourth kind is defined, in one version, simply as the intention to abandon the other three, and, in a parallel passage, as the noble eightfold path itself, or equally as the seven factors for Awakening.

It is worth returning, finally, to the relationship between the Dhamma and the Vinaya, the code of monastic discipline the Buddha established alongside his doctrinal teaching. The two were never meant as separate projects. The Vinaya's detailed rules serve the practical purpose of keeping a large, diverse community running smoothly, but they serve a second purpose as well: repeated, close attention to precise rules of conduct sensitizes a practitioner to the element of intention in every action, in exactly the fine-grained way the teaching on kamma requires. The Dhamma then builds directly on that sensitivity, turning it toward the more refined task of ending kamma altogether. Lay supporters who never take on the full Vinaya still benefit from associating with a community that lives by it, since proximity to disciplined, attentive conduct tends to make one's own conduct more disciplined and attentive in turn — which is one more concrete expression of the same principle of admirable friendship discussed in Section A.

It is worth being explicit, too, about a subtlety in how old and new kamma interact. The Buddha's definition of "old kamma" as the six sense faculties themselves means that the very apparatus through which a person perceives the world — what they are able to see, hear, and otherwise sense, and the general character of the body and mind receiving fresh experience — is itself already a kammic inheritance, distinct from the "new kamma" a person generates moment to moment through present bodily, verbal, and mental action. This distinction matters practically because it clarifies where effort can and cannot be usefully directed: a person cannot simply will away the inherited shape of old kamma, but can, moment to moment, determine the quality of the new kamma layered on top of it — which is exactly the point of leverage the whole practice depends on.

Taken together, these passages resist two common oversimplifications of kamma: that it operates as strict, mechanical retribution, and that it is loose or negotiable enough to be safely ignored. It is regular enough to reward skillful effort reliably, and complex enough that no outside observer — and, the Buddha adds, not even a highly accomplished meditator relying on speculation alone — can fully trace out any single result to its origin. What can be known and used directly, however, is the shape of the process as it operates right now, in one's own mind; and that, the Buddha held, is all that is actually needed for release.

A last point about the organization of the teaching bears directly on how this abridgment itself should be read. Because the causal system underlying the Wings contains numerous feedback loops, any given causal connection can be approached along several different paths, and the Buddha accordingly gave different accounts of the same underlying process to different listeners, or to the same listeners at different times. Interpreters who have tried to force these various accounts into one single, uniform system have generally been forced either to declare one account the sole "true" version and discount the rest, or to treat only the most general statement of mutual causality as significant while dismissing the specific links in each analysis as interchangeable detail, or, more dismissively still, to conclude that the variation shows the Buddha lacked a fully coherent view of causality. None of these responses, on the reading followed here, does justice to what the variation actually reflects: not confusion, but precision — a teacher meeting each listener at the particular point in the causal web where that listener actually stood.

Synthesis: How Part I Sets Up the Wings

Sections A and B of Part I are best read as two passes over the same ground. Section A establishes, from the ordinary fact of skill-development, that action produces results, that some results are better than others, and that attentive effort can improve future action — and shows how, followed far enough, these three ordinary observations generate the four noble truths, dependent co-arising, and this/that conditionality, the doctrinal backbone of everything that follows. Section B then applies that same backbone specifically to kamma, showing why the process is regular without being rigidly deterministic, why it is mental at root rather than physical, why ordinary good intentions are not automatically the same thing as skillful ones, and why a fourth, world-transcending kind of kamma is possible on top of the three ordinary kinds every account of ethics already recognizes.

Both sections converge on the same practical conclusion: the work of Awakening is done neither by passive belief nor by mere physical austerity, but by sustained, attentive cultivation of specific qualities of mind — a cultivation the Buddha organized, for teaching purposes, into the seven interlocking lists summarized in the table above. Part II of the full anthology (not included in this abridgment) takes up each of those seven sets in turn, showing in detail how the frames of reference, the right exertions, the bases for power, the faculties, the strengths, the factors for Awakening, and the path itself each give a complete, workable expression of the principles established here. Part III then reduces all seven sets to the five faculties and shows how the last of them, discernment, turns the Wings themselves into the final object of observation — closing the circle back to the "what" of Awakening with which the Introduction began.

The Seven Sets

An Abridged Guide to the Wings to Awakening

Contents

II. The Seven Sets

A. The Treasures of the Teaching

B. The Four Frames of Reference

C. The Four Right Exertions

D. The Four Bases of Power

II. The Seven Sets

Overview: Reading the Seven Sets Together

Before turning to the four subchapters that follow, it helps to hold the whole shape of the seven sets in mind, since none of the four sets treated here — the treasures of the teaching, the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, and the four bases of power — was ever meant to stand entirely on its own. The full traditional list runs to seven: the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the noble eightfold path. This abridgment follows its source in treating the first four of these seven in detail (subchapters A through D), since together they establish the essential groundwork — the treasure-like status of the whole collection, and the three sets built directly around mindfulness, effort, and concentration — on which the remaining three sets (built around causal, self-reinforcing chains running from conviction or view through to discernment) depend.

Two things are worth holding onto as this material unfolds. First, the seven sets are not a menu of alternative techniques from which a practitioner selects one according to taste; they are seven different lenses on a single body of practice, each illuminating a different facet of the same underlying training. A person who develops the four frames of reference in earnest and to genuine depth will find that they have, in the same movement, been exercising right effort and touching the early stages of the bases of power, precisely because mindfulness, effort, and concentration cannot in practice be pulled fully apart from one another. Second, none of this training floats free of ordinary ethical life. Every one of the seven sets either explicitly contains a factor of virtue (as with conviction in the faculties and strengths, or right speech, action, and livelihood in the eightfold path) or is described as resting on a foundation of virtue already established beforehand. A reader looking for a purely technical or purely inward set of instructions, detachable from questions of how one treats other people, will not find that here; the texts are consistent in treating meditative skill and ethical maturity as two expressions of the same underlying training in attention and intention.

The chapters that follow accordingly move in a deliberate order. Subchapter A explains why the seven sets are called “treasures” at all, and lays out, in condensed form, the overall architecture that ties mindfulness, effort, concentration, and discernment together across every one of the seven sets — material worth revisiting after reading B, C, and D, since much of it will read differently once the individual sets it describes are no longer abstractions. Subchapter B takes up the four frames of reference, the most detailed and arguably the most practically central of the four sets treated here, since the frames of reference supply both the object and the method that the following two sets, right exertion and the bases of power, are then shown to sharpen and

extend. Subchapter C isolates the factor of effort specifically, showing how the same four-part structure of guarding, abandoning, developing, and maintaining applies whether the object at hand is a fleeting unskillful thought or a long-standing habit of years' standing. Subchapter D closes this abridgment's selection with the four bases of power, the set most closely associated in popular imagination with meditative attainment, and shows how even the most extraordinary capacities the texts describe are drawn back, without exception, into the same three-stage structure of practice already introduced under the frames of reference.

A. The Treasures of the Teaching

Introductory Essay (Condensed)

The Buddha never explicitly gathers the seven sets under a single title in the Canon. He lists them together many times when summarizing his teaching, and in one place calls the five faculties "wings to self-awakening," while two other passages mention "seven wings to awakening" without making the reference to the seven sets certain. Even so, the name "Wings to Awakening" for the group is well justified and became fixed at least by the time of early post-canonical works such as the Petakopadesa. The seven sets went on to shape the earliest Abhidhamma literature, the first Buddhist text rendered into Chinese, and later Chinese doctrinal classifications; Tantric mandalas of thirty-seven deities and the symbolic architecture of Tibetan stupas both encode the same thirty-seven factors. Across very different Buddhist traditions, the seven sets remain one of the few genuinely shared reference points.

One curiosity is that two of the seven sets — the five faculties and the five strengths — list exactly the same five qualities. Proposed explanations include: that the same five qualities can operate at two different intensities, a lower one sufficient for entering the stream to Awakening and a higher one needed for full Arahantship, paralleling a similar distinction the Buddha draws elsewhere between an eightfold and a tenfold path; that the Buddha wanted a total of thirty-seven factors because the number carried ancient symbolic weight (it appears in old hexagonal multiplication tables used for musical tuning and in tables underlying early trigonometry and astronomy, and even shows up as the number of guardians in Plato's ideal city); that seven itself symbolized treasure, as with the seven treasures of a universal monarch or the seven qualities of noble wealth, and the Buddha explicitly calls the seven sets "treasures" of his teaching; or that seven echoed the number of recognized systems for tuning a musical scale in the Buddha's day, suggesting that his teaching offered every legitimate way for a person "in tune" (samana) to bring the mind into harmony with the truth.

Practically speaking, the seven sets occupy the middle of the path: they follow the establishment of a virtuous life and lead into the development of liberating discernment, effectively filling the

role elsewhere assigned to concentration practice. A moral life is an absolute prerequisite, and some sets — the faculties/strengths (under "conviction") and the eightfold path (under right speech, action, and livelihood) — build a virtuous life directly into their own factors. The precepts underlying this virtuous life are not external commands but guidelines a person freely adopts on recognizing how kamma and skillful action shape experience; they include not only prohibitions (against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, intoxication, and so on) but also positive practices such as sympathy, reliability, and genuine helpfulness. Because kamma is fundamentally a matter of intention, keeping the precepts requires continuous attention to one's motives and cultivation of the four "sublime attitudes" — good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

This threefold approach to morality — avoiding harmful kamma, cultivating skillful states of mind, and purifying intention — explains why virtue is the necessary foundation for concentration: a blameless life brings freedom from remorse, which naturally gives rise to inner joy, especially when reinforced by reflection on one's own generosity and kindness; that joy in turn provides the basis for the pleasure that supports concentration. Maintaining precepts also exercises, in a preliminary way, the very faculties needed for formal practice — mindfulness (keeping a precept in mind), persistence (sticking to one's resolve), concentration (steady attention to the sublime attitudes and the present moment), and discernment (clarity about motive and the skillful application of a precept to a particular situation). These same four qualities — mindfulness, effort, concentration, and discernment — sit at the center of every one of the seven sets.

The seven sets divide into two broad types. The first — the four frames of reference, four right exertions, and four bases of power — each highlights a single factor of the "concentration" portion of the eightfold path (mindfulness, effort, and concentration respectively), yet each set's own definition draws in the other two factors plus discernment, so that each part of the path implicitly contains the whole, much as a fragment of a hologram can reproduce the entire image. The second type — the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the noble eightfold path — each traces a causal, cyclical sequence: the faculties and strengths run from conviction through persistence, mindfulness, and concentration to discernment, which then reinforces conviction; the awakening factors run from mindfulness through investigation, persistence, rapture, serenity, and concentration to equanimity, which reinforces mindfulness; and the eightfold path runs from discernment (view and resolve) through ethical conduct and effort to mindfulness and concentration, which in turn sharpens discernment. Although the three sequences differ in emphasis, concentration consistently follows right effort and mindfulness in each of them, suggesting that those two factors are specifically meant to culminate in concentration.

Mindfulness and discernment play the most varied roles of all. Mindfulness is required at every step — as a prerequisite for virtue, and again as something virtue itself reinforces — while discernment appears sometimes near the start of a sequence (as right view, which already contains a seed of understanding about kamma) and sometimes only at the very end, as the culminating "clear knowing" that crowns the awakening factors and the eightfold path alike. In every case discernment keeps adding progressively finer feedback loops as practice deepens: it begins as knowledge received from others, matures into an intuitive sense of skillfulness gained through one's own trial and reflection, sharpens into explicit understanding of the four noble truths and their associated duties, and finally becomes the simple knowledge that those duties have been completed. Because of this central, ever-refining role, the Buddha singled out discernment as chief among the wings to self-awakening.

Full Awakening unfolds, according to the texts, across as many as four distinct milestones: stream-entry, which severs self-identity views, doubt, and attachment to mere rules and rituals, guaranteeing no more than seven further rebirths; once-returning, which further weakens passion, aversion, and delusion and guarantees at most one more rebirth; non-returning, which cuts sensual passion and irritation entirely and leads to final liberation in the Pure Abodes without return to this world; and Arahantship, which uproots the remaining fetters — passion for fine-material and formless states, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance — bringing total freedom from rebirth. Each milestone corresponds to the ripening of a different path factor: stream-entry to the maturing of virtue, non-returning to the maturing of concentration, and Arahantship to the maturing of discernment. In every case the underlying dynamic is the same: virtue, concentration, and discernment together bring the mind to a state of "non-fashioning," opening the way to direct experience of the Unfabricated — the twin knowledges of the regularity of cause and effect within experience, and of Unbinding itself.

Selected Passages (§§18–25)

§18 (AN 8:19) — The Buddha compares the ocean's many treasures — pearls, gold, coral, and the rest — to the many treasures found within his teaching and discipline: the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the noble eightfold path. Seeing this repeatedly, he says, is one of the wonders that delights the monks.

§19 (DN 16) — Shortly before his final Unbinding, the Buddha gathers the monks and reviews the same seven sets as the qualities he has realized directly and now hands on for them to grasp, cultivate, and pursue, for the long-term welfare and happiness of both human and celestial beings. He then announces that he will pass away in three months, follows this with reflective verses on the universality of death and decay (young and old, rich and poor, all vessels whole or

broken, all life heading toward death), and exhorts the monks to remain heedful, mindful, and virtuous, with their resolve well concentrated.

§20 (AN 7:68) — A hen who fails to properly cover, warm, and incubate her eggs cannot make her chicks hatch safely no matter how much she wishes it; a hen who tends them properly succeeds even without any explicit wish. In the same way, a monk who does not actually develop the seven sets cannot simply wish his way to release, while one who does develop them attains release as a natural outcome, whether or not the wish for release is even present. Two further similes reinforce the point: a carpenter's apprentice cannot track the tiny daily wear on his adze handle yet knows it is worn through once it finally gives way, just as a practitioner may not track the moment-to-moment wearing down of the effluents yet knows when they are exhausted; and an old ship's rigging left ashore after months at sea rots away naturally under sun, wind, and rain, just as the fetters of a dedicated practitioner wither away of their own accord.

§21 (AN 5:56) — A monk troubled by mental fog, disorientation, drowsiness, unhappiness in the holy life, and doubt about the teachings brings his difficulty to his preceptor, who takes him to the Buddha. The Buddha explains that such symptoms arise from neglecting sense-restraint, moderate eating, wakefulness, clear comprehension of skillful qualities, and daily devotion to developing the wings to awakening — and instructs the monk to train in exactly these five areas. Following this guidance, the monk goes on, in due course, to attain Arahantship.

§22 (AN 3:16) — A monk who guards the sense doors (not seizing on the pleasing or displeasing features of what is seen, heard, and so on), knows moderation in eating (eating only to sustain the body and support the holy life rather than for pleasure or vanity), and is devoted to wakefulness (spending much of the day and two of the three night watches in walking and sitting meditation, resting only briefly in a mindful, alert posture with intent to rise) is said to follow a blameless path and to have laid the groundwork for ending the mental effluents.

§23 (AN 9:1) — Asked by wanderers of other sects what prepares the ground for developing the wings to self-awakening, the monks are told to answer with five prerequisites: admirable friendship; personal virtue, restrained and consummate in conduct; ready access to Dhamma talk that opens the mind (on modest wants, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, and release); sustained persistence in abandoning the unskillful and cultivating the skillful; and discernment of arising and passing away that leads rightly to the ending of stress. Admirable friendship, the Buddha notes, naturally tends to bring the other four in its wake. Once these five are established, four further practices are recommended: contemplating the unattractive, to abandon lust; developing good will, to abandon ill will; practicing mindfulness of breathing, to cut off distracting thought; and perceiving

inconstancy, to uproot the underlying conceit "I am" — a perception that, fully matured, leads to the direct uprooting of that conceit and to Unbinding here and now.

§24 (Iti 82) — Three "divine sounds" resound among the devas at fitting moments: when a disciple resolves to go forth and "do battle with Māra"; when that disciple actively engages in developing the seven sets, marking the battle itself; and when, through the ending of the effluents, the disciple attains full release, marking victory in that battle.

§25 (Iti 97) — A person of admirable virtue, admirable qualities, and admirable discernment is called complete and supreme. Admirable virtue is restrained, blameless conduct; admirable qualities means active engagement in developing the seven sets; admirable discernment is the direct realization, through the ending of the effluents, of full release. Closing verses summarize each of the three qualities in turn — the conscientious monk free of wrongdoing, the unassuming monk well developed in the qualities leading to awakening, and the effluent-free monk who discerns for himself the ending of stress — concluding that one consummate in all three has, untroubled and unattached, "abandoned the All."

Reflections for Practice

A reader coming to this material for the first time might reasonably ask why so much weight is placed on naming and classifying — why the tradition bothers distinguishing seven sets, thirty-seven factors, two duplicated lists, and so on, when the underlying instruction (be mindful, make an effort, calm and clarify the mind) can be stated in a single sentence. The passages gathered above suggest an answer: the classification is not decoration but a form of quality control. A practitioner who only ever hears the single-sentence version of the instruction has no way of checking, session by session, whether the various components of that instruction are actually present and balanced. The seven sets, and the various sub-lists within them, give a practitioner something closer to a checklist — not to be recited mechanically, but to be used the way an experienced craftsperson uses a mental list of things that tend to go wrong, checking almost automatically for common failure modes.

The treasure similes in §§18 and §25 are worth sitting with for a moment rather than passing over as pious rhetoric. Calling the seven sets "treasures" does two things at once. It signals value — that this body of practice is precious, worth protecting and returning to — but it also signals plurality: a treasury holds many different kinds of valuable object, not one thing repeated seven times. The ocean simile in particular resists the temptation to rank the sets against one another, listing pearls, gold, and coral side by side without suggesting that any one gem makes the others redundant. This has a direct practical implication: a student who has found one approach to meditation that works — breath awareness, say, or loving-kindness — need not feel that sticking with it means neglecting "the rest" of the training, since a single well-developed frame of

reference is described in §§30 and 44 as sufficient, on its own, to bring every other skillful quality into play.

The final section of this introductory essay, on the four levels of Awakening and their correspondence to the maturing of virtue, concentration, and discernment in turn, is easy to read as a purely doctrinal classification with little bearing on ordinary practice. But it offers a useful corrective to a common source of discouragement: the assumption that any given session of practice must either produce dramatic insight or count as a failure. If stream-entry corresponds specifically to the ripening of virtue, then a long stretch of practice in which the most noticeable changes are ethical — less reactivity in speech, steadier follow-through on commitments, a diminishing willingness to cut corners — is not a detour from the "real" meditative path but is itself exactly the kind of maturation the texts describe as most fundamental. Concentration and discernment are described as building on that foundation, not as substitutes for it.

It is also worth noting what this subchapter's account of the two "types" of set implies about how a beginner should actually get started, since the abstract holographic and cyclical descriptions can otherwise seem to offer no obvious entry point. Because concentration is shown, across every version of the causal chains examined here, to depend consistently on effort and mindfulness developed beforehand, and because the frames of reference, right exertions, and bases of power are shown to each contain the other two within their own definitions, a new practitioner does not need to somehow master all seven sets in parallel before making progress on any one of them. Beginning anywhere within the first three sets — most naturally with the frames of reference, since they supply a concrete object of attention — and developing that set with genuine care will, on the account given here, already be exercising the others to some degree, and will in time open naturally onto the causal, cyclical sets that follow.

B. The Four Frames of Reference

Introductory Essay (Condensed)

The term satipaṭṭāna ("frame of reference") can be read two ways: as sati (mindfulness) plus paṭṭāna (foundation), pointing to the object kept in mind as a frame for one's experience; or as sati plus upaṭṭāna (establishing near), pointing to the approach of keeping something closely and steadily in mind. Scholars disagree on which is "correct," but for practical purposes both readings hold together: the proper object and the proper approach to it are equally essential, and over the course of practice the "what" (the chosen object) and the "how" (the approach) merge, since the qualities cultivated through the approach eventually become objects of investigation in their own right.

Some passages describe developing the frames of reference as a precondition for jhāna, which then grounds liberating discernment; others move directly from the frames of reference to the transcendent without mentioning jhāna at all. This isn't evidence of two separate paths, since many other passages insist that jhāna is necessary for discernment to mature. The most consistent reading is that full development of the frames of reference implicitly develops the seven factors for awakening, which are themselves inseparable from jhāna — so jhāna is built into the practice even where it goes unnamed. This is confirmed elsewhere by the frames of reference being developed specifically "via the noble eightfold path" (which includes right concentration) and by their close correspondence to the sixteen steps of breath meditation, itself a description of how jhāna is developed and then placed in the service of ending the mind's effluents.

The four objects taken as frames of reference — the body, feelings, the mind, and mental qualities — are each to be viewed "in and of themselves": not in terms of their worldly usefulness, beauty, or significance, but simply as they present themselves to direct experience. The first three serve as the "given" objects that experience offers up on its own; whichever one a meditator chooses becomes the primary frame to which all other experience is related, the way one keeps hold of an object in the hand while merely noticing, without releasing it, whatever else brushes against the hand. The fourth object, "mental qualities," nominally covers the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense media, the seven awakening factors, and the four noble truths; but closer reading of each sub-list shows they all reduce, one way or another, to the abandoning of the hindrances and the development of the awakening factors — a reading supported by early Abhidhamma sources that restrict this section to exactly those two topics. Because the stated purpose of the frames of reference as a whole is to bring the awakening factors to completion, treating dhamma here as "mental quality" (rather than the more general "phenomenon") best preserves that unifying purpose.

Each of the four frames is described as independently sufficient for full Awakening, because whichever object is chosen, the same underlying three-stage approach unfolds:

First, the frame of reference itself: remaining focused on the chosen object while being ardent (applying effort), alert (clearly aware of the present), and mindful (keeping the task in mind), setting aside the greed and distress that come from slipping back into the world's usual narratives. This amounts to concentration practice, and when successful brings the mind to the first jhāna; a further refinement — remaining focused on the object without any discursive thinking connected to it — brings the mind on to the second jhāna and beyond. Familiar modern methods such as "noting" practice, body-scanning, and breath meditation can all be mapped onto this same structure of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

Second, the development of the frame of reference: observing the arising and passing away either of the chosen object itself, of the other frames as they intrude, or of the very mental qualities that help or hinder the practice — and, crucially, actively experimenting with and manipulating these causal patterns rather than passively watching them, much as one learns to cook by actually attempting dishes rather than by watching eggs sit in a bowl. Equanimity, for example, is first simply noted as present or absent; with continued practice, one learns how to deliberately give rise to it and bring it to full maturity. This same active, experimental sensitivity underlies the sixteen-step training in breath meditation.

Third, the culmination: mindfulness of the chosen frame maintained "simply to the extent of knowledge and recollection," with the mind independent and unsustained by anything in the world — an equipoise the Buddha elsewhere calls "entry into emptiness," in which whatever is genuinely present is simply registered as "there is this." Attempting to jump straight to this stage without first developing the causal sensitivity of the second stage generally fails in practice, since it is precisely that sensitivity which uncovers the basic patterns of cause and effect needed to produce real dispassion and to locate the exact point of release.

This same three-part pattern — focusing on events as they are in the present, learning to skillfully manipulate their causes, and finally arriving at a fully developed equipoise beyond even that skill — recurs throughout Buddhist meditation instruction generally, including breath meditation and the cultivation of discernment. A few subsidiary themes round out the section: deliberately reversing one's perception of loathsome and unloathsome objects is a discernment exercise requiring firm concentration to avoid simply distorting perception; the traditional contemplation of body parts is meant to instill a healthy rather than an unhealthy negative self-image, since recognizing that every body, however outwardly attractive, is composed of the same unglamorous parts undercuts both vanity and feelings of inferiority, and helps loosen lust generally; and the charge that this practice is self-centered is answered by denying any real gap

between one's own true welfare and that of others — illustrated by two acrobats who can only protect each other by each maintaining his or her own balance — with fully awakened teachers continuing to serve others afterward through an unshakeable equanimity regardless of how their teaching is received.

Selected Passages (§§26–48)

§26 (AN 8:81) — A branchless, leafless tree cannot mature its buds, bark, sapwood, or heartwood; likewise, a person lacking mindfulness and alertness spoils, link by link, the entire supporting chain: no sense of shame and compunction, hence no sense-restraint, hence no virtue, hence no right concentration, hence no true knowledge of things as they are, hence no dispassion, hence no knowledge of release. A tree abundant in branches and leaves matures fully; likewise abundant mindfulness and alertness allows every link of the same chain, ending in release, to flourish.

§27 (SN 47:16) — Asked by Ven. Uttiya for brief guidance suitable for solitary practice, the Buddha tells him first to purify what is most basic — well-purified virtue and rightly aligned views — and then, resting on that foundation, to develop the four frames of reference, which will carry him beyond the reach of death.

§28–29 (SN 47:35, 40) — Standard definitions: a monk is "mindful" by remaining focused, ardent, alert, on each of the four frames in turn, setting aside worldly greed and distress; he is "alert" by clearly knowing feelings, thoughts, and perceptions as they arise, persist, and subside. The "development" of the frames of reference is watching the arising and passing away of each frame, and the "path of practice" that leads to their development is simply the noble eightfold path.

§30 (MN 10, condensed) — The Buddha's major exposition of the four frames, described as the direct path to purification, to the ending of sorrow, and to the realization of Unbinding. Under "body," the methods include mindfulness of the in-and-out breath (with its calming stages), awareness of the body's postures and everyday activities, systematic reflection on the body's anatomical parts, analysis of the body in terms of the four elements, and the charnel-ground contemplations on a corpse's stages of decay. Under "feelings," pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings are each further divided into those "of the flesh" and "not of the flesh." Under "mind," one discerns the presence or absence of passion, aversion, and delusion, along with various qualities such as being constricted, scattered, enlarged, surpassed, concentrated, or released. Under "mental qualities," the discourse covers the five hindrances, the five clinging-aggregates, the six sense media together with the fetters that arise dependent on them, the seven awakening factors, and the four noble truths. The discourse concludes that sustained practice along these lines can bring either full Awakening or non-return within as little as seven days.

§31 (MN 118) — The sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing are shown to fulfill all four frames of reference at once: awareness of the whole body and the calming of bodily fabrication fulfill the body frame; sensitivity to rapture, pleasure, and the calming of mental fabrication fulfill the feelings frame; sensitivity to, gladdening, steadying, and releasing the mind fulfill the mind frame; and focusing on inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment fulfill the mental-qualities frame.

§32 (DN 18) — Becoming rightly concentrated and clear while focused internally on any one of the four frames can give rise to a corresponding intuitive knowledge and vision of that same frame externally, in others.

§33 (MN 125) — Just as an elephant trainer binds a wild forest elephant to a sturdy post to break its wild habits and habituate it to human ways, the four frames of reference serve to bind the mind of a trainee, breaking old household habits and preoccupations. Further training then has the meditator remain focused on each frame while dropping all thought connected with it, a refinement that leads into the second jhāna.

§34 (SN 47:4) — The four frames are recommended not only for beginners still new to the training but equally for those already on the path and even for fully liberated Arahants, who continue to remain focused on each frame while being wholly "disjoined" from clinging to it.

§35 (SN 47:8) — An unskillful cook who never notices what pleases his master goes unrewarded; a skillful cook who attentively picks up on his master's preferences is rewarded well. Likewise, a monk who practices the frames of reference without noticing whether his mind is actually becoming concentrated and his defilements actually being abandoned gains no real benefit, while one who attentively "picks up on the theme" of his own mind is rewarded with genuine concentration, mindfulness, and alertness.

§36 (SN 47:10) — The Buddha teaches Ānanda two complementary methods. "Development based on directing" applies when a fever, sluggishness, or external scattering arises during practice of a frame: the mind is deliberately redirected to an inspiring theme until delight, rapture, serenity, and pleasure lead it back into concentration, at which point the inspiring theme can be released and bare, undirected mindfulness resumed. "Development based on not directing" applies when the mind is already unconstricted and at ease: one simply notes that fact directly, while remaining focused on the chosen frame.

§37–38 (SN 47:6–7) — A hawk-caught quail laments having strayed from its own "proper range" (a freshly plowed field) into unfamiliar territory, and once returned there is able to outmaneuver the hawk entirely; a foolish monkey, by contrast, is caught fast in a hunter's tar trap after wandering into unfamiliar ground, ensnared paw after paw until it can no longer move. In

the same way, wandering outside one's "proper range" — that is, becoming caught up in the five strands of sensual pleasure — gives Māra an opening, while remaining within one's proper range, the four frames of reference, denies him any foothold.

§39 (SN 35:206) — Six animals of very different habitats and instincts — snake, crocodile, bird, dog, hyena, and monkey — tied together by a rope each strain toward its own native territory until, exhausted, they submit to whichever is strongest; but if that same rope is instead tied to a firm post, the animals eventually settle down beside it. In the same way, without body-mindfulness the six senses each strain toward their own favored objects, but with body-mindfulness firmly established as a "strong post," the senses no longer succeed in pulling the mind away.

§40 (SN 47:20) — A man ordered to carry a brimming bowl of oil past a great crowd gathered around a singing, dancing beauty queen, with an executioner following close behind ready to strike if even a drop spills, will not let himself be distracted by the surrounding spectacle. This total absorption illustrates the degree of care meant by "mindfulness immersed in the body."

§41–42 (Ud 3:5; AN 1:225 and following) — Short verses and sayings praise body-mindfulness as the single quality that, when developed, calms body and mind, brings every skillful quality on the side of clear knowing to full maturity, uproots the conceit "I am," and opens the way to the Deathless — while its neglect is, correspondingly, neglect of the Deathless itself.

§43 (SN 47:37) — As desire is abandoned with respect to each of the four frames in turn, through remaining focused on it, the Deathless is directly realized.

§44 (SN 54:10) — A pile of dust at a crossroads is leveled by a cart approaching from any of the four directions; in the same way, taking up any one of the four frames of reference levels unskillful qualities just as thoroughly as any other.

§45–46 (SN 52:1; AN 5:144) — Questioned by Ven. Mahā Moggallāna on the proper extent of practicing the four frames, Ven. Anuruddha describes observing the arising and passing away of each frame internally, externally, and both together — and, further, being able at will to perceive the loathsome as unloathsome, the unloathsome as loathsome, both together, or neither, remaining simply equanimous, alert, and mindful throughout. The companion passage explains the purpose of this flexible perception: to prevent passion, aversion, or delusion from arising no matter what sort of object — attractive, repellent, or neutral — happens to be encountered.

§47 (SN 47:19) — A bamboo acrobat proposes to his assistant, Frying Pan, that they watch out for one another while balancing atop a pole; she corrects him, insisting that each must instead watch out for him- or herself, and that only in this way can both come down safely. The Buddha

endorses her answer as the correct principle: practicing a frame of reference with the resolve "I will watch after myself" is, precisely because of the endurance, non-violence, and good will it cultivates, simultaneously a way of watching after others; and practicing with the resolve "I will watch after others" likewise depends on, and reinforces, watching after oneself.

§48 (DN 16) — During a severe illness in his final years, the Buddha bears sharp pain mindfully and, judging it improper to pass away without addressing the community, deliberately suppresses the illness through persistence and recovers. He tells Ven. Ānanda that he has taught the Dhamma with no hidden or "closed-fist" portion held back and has no wish to control the Sangha, comparing his aged body to an old cart kept moving only "with the help of bamboo strips." He instructs the monks to be an island unto themselves, taking themselves and the Dhamma as their only refuge, without relying on anything external — something accomplished precisely by remaining focused, ardent, alert, and mindful with respect to the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities.

Reflections for Practice

Of the seven sets, the four frames of reference are the ones most readers will already have encountered in some form, since mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities underlies the great majority of meditation instruction taught today under the broad heading of "mindfulness practice." The material gathered here is worth reading against that background precisely because it complicates a few common simplifications. The most important of these is the idea that mindfulness practice is essentially passive — that the instruction is simply to notice whatever arises, without preference, effort, or agenda. The texts summarized above resist that reading at several points: the second stage of practice, described under §30 and again in the essay's discussion of equanimity, calls explicitly for active experimentation with causes, and §§45–46 go so far as to recommend deliberately reversing one's perception of loathsome and attractive objects as a discernment exercise. "Bare attention" in this framework is not the whole of the practice but one stage within a larger, more active arc.

The cook simile in §35 deserves particular attention because it names a failure mode that is easy to fall into without noticing: going through the motions of a practice — sitting with the breath, scanning the body — without ever checking whether the practice is actually doing what it is meant to do. A meditator can maintain years of consistent daily sitting and never once ask, in the terms this simile suggests, whether that sitting is in fact producing greater concentration and a reduction in defilement, as opposed to simply producing familiarity with the posture of sitting. The corrective offered here is not more effort in the ordinary sense, but more attentiveness to outcome — "picking up on the theme," as the simile puts it, of one's own mind, the way an

attentive cook learns to read a diner's preferences rather than simply repeating the same recipe regardless of result.

The two-mode teaching to Ānanda in §36 — development based on directing, and development based on not directing — offers a practical answer to a question many practitioners eventually run into: what should be done when a session of practice simply is not settling, versus what should be done once it already has? The texts do not treat this as a dilemma requiring a single universal technique; they treat it as two distinct situations calling for two distinct responses, matched to the mind's actual condition rather than to a fixed script. This willingness to prescribe different approaches for different states of mind runs throughout the material on the frames of reference, and it is one of the clearest points at which the collection resists being reduced to a single formula.

Finally, the discussion of body-part contemplation and the "healthy negative image" is worth flagging explicitly, since this particular practice has sometimes been received, especially outside traditional Buddhist contexts, as encouraging self-disgust or body-shame. The reading offered in the essay above draws a sharper distinction: an unhealthy negative self-image singles out one's own body as uniquely unworthy while idealizing others; the practice described in the texts instead levels the playing field entirely, recognizing that every body, however conventionally attractive, is built from the same unglamorous constituent parts. The intended effect is not increased shame but decreased comparison — and, ultimately, decreased lust and vanity alike, since both depend on treating some bodies as categorically different from others.

C. The Four Right Exertions

Introductory Essay (Condensed)

The four right exertions describe how effort is properly applied to cultivating the mind. The standard formula has a monk generate desire, endeavor, arouse persistence, and uphold his intent for four purposes: preventing the arising of unskillful qualities not yet arisen, abandoning unskillful qualities that have already arisen, giving rise to skillful qualities not yet arisen, and maintaining and perfecting skillful qualities already present. These four are also called, respectively, guarding, abandoning, developing, and maintaining. In practice the four often overlap — abandoning an unskillful state can be a natural byproduct of developing a skillful one such as mindfulness, and the reverse can hold as well — but genuine right exertion requires more than simple avoidance of what is unskillful; it must apply mindfulness and discernment to understand how even skillfulness itself is eventually to be transcended.

Perhaps the most surprising ingredient in right exertion is desire, ordinarily associated with the craving that causes suffering. The Buddha recognized that desire, like other mental qualities, can be either skillful or unskillful, and that a measure of skillful desire is indispensable to the path (a theme developed further under the bases of power). The essential point is that effort itself must be skillfully applied: countering hatred with hatred, for instance, tends to make matters worse rather than better, whereas the more patient, causally sensitive approach cultivated in the second stage of frames-of-reference practice actually resolves it. The basic formula for right exertion also implicitly calls on mindfulness and discernment, since discriminating skillful from unskillful qualities is itself an act of discernment, and the skillful qualities singled out for cultivation — chiefly the seven awakening factors — must themselves be brought to a high level of refinement for the exertions to succeed.

One passage lists seven distinct ways that unskillful qualities may be abandoned: by seeing (through right view), by restraining (sense-restraint), by using (mindful, non-indulgent use of requisites), by tolerating (patient endurance of hardship), by avoiding (steering clear of danger and unsuitable company), by destroying (immediately dispelling arisen unskillful thought), and by developing (cultivating the awakening factors). The text deliberately leaves open which method suits which situation, since this is something each meditator must discover through personal exploration. The amount of effort required likewise varies by individual and circumstance — practice can be painful and slow, painful and quick, pleasant and slow, or pleasant and quick — and even within one person's practice, sometimes bare equanimous observation is enough to dissolve an unskillful state, while other times deliberate, energetic effort is required. Neither constant, exhausting exertion nor a reflexive avoidance of "effort" is the

right approach; skillful effort means tuning the level and kind of exertion to the specific task and to one's own present capacity.

Right exertion is equivalent to the factor of "ardency" within frames-of-reference practice, and its role becomes progressively subtler across the three stages of that practice: first keeping the mind on its chosen frame and warding off qualities that would pull it away; then actively steering the process of observing arising and passing away toward stillness; and finally maintaining just enough of a bare, open awareness to allow the mind to settle into non-fashioning — an equipoise ultimately beyond the very categories of effort and non-effort, as captured in the image of crossing the flood of rebirth by neither pushing forward nor staying in place. Finally, the goal of this practice is not a return to some imagined pure, childlike state prior to social conditioning; in the Buddhist analysis, an infant's mind is not pure but simply ignorant, its capacity for unskillful action merely too weak yet to show itself. Purification therefore comes not from renouncing one's developed faculties but from refining them to ever higher levels of skill — which is exactly the function that right exertion serves.

Selected Passages (§§49–62)

§49 (SN 49:1) — The standard formula for the four right exertions, paired with the image of the River Ganges sloping steadily eastward: just so, developing the four right exertions inclines the mind steadily toward Unbinding.

§50 (AN 4:14) — The four exertions named as guarding (restraining the senses so that unskillful qualities gain no opening), abandoning (refusing to acquiesce to arisen thoughts of sensuality, ill will, or violence, and dispelling them outright), developing (cultivating each of the seven awakening factors on the basis of seclusion, dispassion, and cessation), and maintaining (sustaining a favorable object of concentration, such as contemplation of a corpse in its various stages).

§51 (MN 2, condensed) — The Buddha's systematic teaching on seven categories of mental effluents and how each is abandoned. Effluents abandoned by seeing arise from inappropriate reflection on one's existence in the past, future, or present, giving rise to speculative views about a self; right attention to the four noble truths abandons these and cuts the fetters of self-identity view, doubt, and attachment to mere rules and rituals. Effluents abandoned by restraining are dealt with through sense-restraint. Effluents abandoned by using are addressed through mindful, non-indulgent use of robes, almsfood, lodging, and medicine, solely for their functional purpose. Effluents abandoned by tolerating call for patient endurance of physical discomfort, harsh weather, and unwelcome speech. Effluents abandoned by avoiding call for steering clear of physical dangers and unsuitable company. Effluents abandoned by destroying call for immediately dispelling arisen thoughts of sensuality, ill will, or violence. Effluents abandoned by

developing call for cultivating the seven awakening factors. A monk who has abandoned all seven categories in this way is said to have severed craving, thrown off the fetters, and made a complete end of suffering.

§52 (AN 5:53) — Five factors for exertion: conviction in the Buddha's awakening; freedom from illness, with a constitution fit for exertion; honesty and freedom from deceit in dealing with one's teacher and companions; steadfast, sustained persistence in abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful; and discernment leading to the right ending of stress.

§53–54 (Iti 16–17) — Of all internal factors, appropriate attention is singled out as most helpful to a trainee, since it directly supports abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful; of all external factors, admirable friendship is singled out in exactly the same way, since a good friend's example and advice likewise steer a trainee toward what is skillful.

§55–56 (Iti 34; SN 16:2) — Without ardor and without a felt sense of urgency (compunction) about unskillful qualities arising or skillful qualities failing to arise, self-awakening is said to be impossible; with both ardor and compunction, it becomes attainable. In a dialogue between Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Mahā Kassapa, "ardor" is defined as actively rousing effort at each of the four right exertions, while "compunction" is defined as feeling genuine concern at the prospect of failing to do so.

§57 (MN 5) — Ven. Sāriputta offers Ven. Mahā Moggallāna four similes involving a bronze bowl: left dirty and neglected, it stays dirty; used and cleaned regularly, it becomes progressively cleaner; kept clean but then neglected, it becomes dirty again; kept clean and properly maintained, it stays clean. Applied to practitioners, a person unaware of his own "internal blemish" (consorting with unskillful wishes) has no reason to work at removing it and dies still defiled, whereas a person aware of the blemish works to remove it and dies undefiled; a person free of blemish who fails to recognize this may still fall prey to vanity and become defiled through attachment to appearances, while one who recognizes and maintains that freedom remains undefiled.

§58 (AN 10:51) — A person fond of adornment checks a mirror or bowl of water for blemishes on the face and works to remove any that are found; in the same way, a monk should regularly examine his own mind for covetousness, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness, doubt, anger, soiled thought, bodily agitation, laziness, or lack of concentration. If any of these are found present, he should apply the same urgency he would if his own head or turban were on fire; if none are found, his task becomes tuning those same qualities to an even higher degree, for the sake of fully ending the effluents.

§59 (MN 101) — The Buddha explains that fruitful striving neither loads itself down with unnecessary pain nor becomes infatuated with pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, and describes two complementary techniques: applying a deliberate counter-effort against a given cause of stress, or developing equanimity toward it, both of which lead to dispassion. He illustrates this first with the case of a jealous, love-struck man whose distress at seeing his beloved flirting with someone else vanishes entirely once he deliberately abandons his desire and passion for her, and again with the fletcher's simile of heating and straightening an arrow shaft only until it becomes straight, at which point the heating is no longer needed — just as painful exertion in practice is needed only until its purpose has been fulfilled.

§60 (MN 66) — Four types of practitioners are distinguished by how they respond to memories and impulses connected with past attachments as they continue practicing renunciation: one who merely tolerates such thoughts without actively dispelling them; one who actively abandons and destroys them as they arise; one whose mindfulness, though initially slow to notice such thoughts, quickly dispels them once it does — likened to a few drops of water vanishing almost instantly off a pan heated all day; and one who, having fully realized that all attachment is the root of suffering, no longer has such thoughts arise at all.

§61 (MN 78) — The wanderer Uggāhamāna claims that anyone who simply refrains from bodily, verbal, and mental wrongdoing and from wrong livelihood is thereby consummate in what is skillful. The Buddha points out that by this standard even a helpless infant, incapable of intentional wrongdoing beyond a little kicking or crying, would qualify as such a person. True consummate skillfulness instead requires ten qualities — the right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration, knowledge, and release of a fully trained Arahant — with the sources, causes, and cessation of unskillful and skillful bodily conduct, verbal conduct, and mental resolve traced out in detail, culminating each time in the same standard formula for right exertion as the practice that leads to their cessation.

§62 (SN 1:1) — Asked by a deva how he crossed the flood of the round of rebirth, the Buddha answers that he did so neither by pushing forward, which would only whirl him about, nor by staying in place, which would only cause him to sink — an image of effort brought to such refinement that it transcends the very categories of striving and non-striving.

Reflections for Practice

The four right exertions address a question that the frames of reference, taken alone, can leave unanswered: given that a certain mental quality has been noticed — an unskillful state present, a skillful one absent — what, concretely, is a practitioner supposed to do about it? The seven methods of abandonment listed in §51 (seeing, restraining, using, tolerating, avoiding, destroying, developing) function as a kind of practical taxonomy of response, and part of their

value lies in making explicit that not every unskillful state calls for the same treatment. A fleeting, low-grade irritation might be most efficiently handled simply by tolerating it without feeding it further attention; a recurring pattern rooted in habitual sense-indulgence might call instead for restraint at the level of the senses themselves; a deeply entrenched view might require nothing less than direct insight ("seeing") into its origin. Trying to apply a single method indiscriminately — forcing oneself to "destroy" every unwanted thought through sheer willpower, for instance, regardless of its nature — is precisely the kind of unskillful effort the essay above warns against, since it risks treating hatred with a kind of internal aggression that only reinforces the underlying pattern.

The mirror simile in §58 is worth using literally, as a template for a periodic check-in rather than a one-time diagnostic: covetousness, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness, doubt, anger, soiled thought, bodily tension, laziness, and lack of concentration make a fairly complete inventory of the common obstacles practitioners report, and reviewing them explicitly — rather than waiting for one of them to become disruptive enough to notice on its own — is one of the more concrete pieces of practical guidance offered anywhere in this collection. The urgency the passage recommends (comparing the response to that of someone whose own head is on fire) is not meant to induce anxiety about the presence of these states, which the texts elsewhere treat as an entirely ordinary feature of an untrained mind, but to counter the opposite and more common failure: noticing a familiar unskillful pattern and shrugging it off as unremarkable simply because it is familiar.

The distinction drawn in §59 between exerting a countering effort and simply developing equanimity toward a given source of stress addresses a tension that shows up constantly in ordinary discussions of self-discipline: is the right response to an unwanted impulse to fight it, or to let it be? The text's answer is that both are legitimate tools, chosen according to the situation, and that the test of success in either case is the same — whether dispassion toward the underlying cause of stress actually results. The fletcher's simile, heating and straightening the arrow shaft only until it becomes straight and no further, offers a useful check against a fairly common practice error: continuing to apply forceful, corrective effort well past the point where it is actually needed, simply out of habit or an assumption that more effort is always better.

Finally, the correction offered to Uggāhamāna in §61 — that mere non-wrongdoing, without more, describes a helpless infant as readily as a genuinely accomplished practitioner — is a useful check against a subtle complacency that can develop in long-term ethical practice: the sense that having avoided obvious misconduct for a long stretch of time is itself the finish line. The ten qualities the Buddha lists in response make clear that consummate skillfulness is an active, cultivated achievement built on right view, effort, and discernment, not simply the passive absence of failure.

D. The Four Bases of Power

Introductory Essay (Condensed)

The Pali term iddhi, translated "power," has no single adequate English equivalent (success, accomplishment, and prowess have all been proposed). In the specific context of the four bases of power, it refers to the supranormal abilities that concentration practice can produce — levitation and other feats of bodily mastery, clairaudience, mind-reading, recollection of past lives, and clairvoyant knowledge of other beings' kammic destinations — together with a sixth and uniquely transcendent "power," the ending of the mental effluents. Only this last is strictly necessary to the path; the others are optional and, left unchecked, can actually feed an unawakened person's greed, aversion, or delusion. The Buddha accordingly forbade monastics from displaying such powers before the laity, holding that no display could rival the impact of a teaching that simply delivers its promised results when put into practice.

Since some meditators do develop these powers naturally in the course of practice, the four bases of power provide guidance for folding their mastery back into the broader framework of frames-of-reference meditation, so that the process leads toward liberation rather than away from it. The brief formula describes developing "the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire (or persistence, or intent, or discrimination) and the fabrications of exertion" — each of the four bases combining the four right exertions, a state of concentration, and one particular mental quality as its dominant condition. Desire, persistence, and intent are all said to be present, to some extent, in every state of jhāna; "concentration founded on desire" simply means desire is currently the most prominent of the three. Discrimination, meanwhile, though not automatically present in early jhāna, becomes essential as concentration deepens (functioning first as evaluation, and eventually as full discernment), and is indispensable to the fifth factor of the noble right concentration that leads to Awakening.

A common criticism holds that desire, effort, intent, and discriminating thought are themselves obstacles — both to a genuinely calm mind and to a goal (the Unfabricated) that lies beyond such fabricated categories altogether. The extended formula answers the first half of this criticism by showing that the problem lies not in these qualities themselves but in how well they are tuned: desire, for instance, can be overly sluggish (mixed with laziness), overly active (mixed with restlessness), inwardly constricted (mixed with sloth and drowsiness), or outwardly scattered (stirred up by sensuality) — in each case a matter of poor tuning rather than an inherent defect. It answers the second half by pointing to the image of a path: a road to a destination is not the destination itself, nor does the act of walking cause the destination to exist, yet walking remains indispensable to arriving there. In the same way, the unfabricated goal cannot be produced by desire or effort, but the fabricated process of the path leading to it depends on both.

The extended formula's final movement — perceiving front as the same as behind, above as the same as below, night as day and day as night — describes the total mastery of concentration that underlies the supranormal powers: an awareness freed from its usual anchoring in spatial and temporal orientation, described as "open and unhampered" and "brightened." Fully perfecting even this expanded awareness, however, still calls for the same second-stage sensitivity found in frames-of-reference practice — watching for subtle limitations or defilements that might remain even within an apparently boundless awareness — and finally for the same third-stage letting go, relinquishing even the notion that "I" am the master of this power or that "my mind" is concentrated, and inclining the mind instead toward the Deathless, simply noting what is genuinely present. At that point, mastery of power and the very threshold of Awakening coincide.

Perhaps owing to their exotic associations, the bases of power have historically received less attention in Western writing on Buddhism than the other six sets. In the wider Asian tradition, by contrast, the same four qualities — desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination, balanced by concentration and right effort — are frequently generalized well beyond their original meditative context and cited as guidance for successful accomplishment of any undertaking, worldly or spiritual.

Selected Passages (§§63–68)

§63 (SN 51:2) — The standard formula for the four bases of power, together with the general principle that neglecting them is neglecting the noble path to the ending of stress, while undertaking them is undertaking that same path.

§64 (SN 51:26 combined with DN 2, condensed) — Asked by Ven. Ānanda to define power, its basis, its development, and the path leading to it, the Buddha lays out the traditional six higher knowledges. The first is a set of supranormal bodily feats — multiplying oneself, appearing and vanishing, passing unimpeded through solid matter, walking on water, flying, touching the sun and moon, and exerting influence as far as the Brahmā realms — likened to a skilled potter, ivory-carver, or goldsmith freely shaping material already well prepared. The second is the divine ear, hearing both human and divine sounds near and far, likened to a traveler recognizing different kinds of drums and instruments along a road. The third is knowledge of others' minds — discerning states with or without passion, aversion, or delusion, and various qualities of constriction, expansiveness, concentration, and release — likened to clearly seeing one's own reflection in a clean mirror. The fourth is recollection of many past lives in detail, likened to remembering, step by step, one's route through a series of villages. The fifth is the divine eye, seeing beings pass away and reappear according to their kamma, likened to watching people move about a town square from a high vantage point. The sixth, called simply "power," is the

ending of the mental effluents through direct realization of the four noble truths, likened to seeing shells, gravel, and fish clearly through a pool of still, clear mountain water. The "base" of power is defined as whatever path or practice leads to attaining it; its "development" is the standard formula involving desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination together with the fabrications of exertion; and the "path of practice" leading to that development is, once again, the noble eightfold path.

§65 (SN 51:13) — A technical clarification: "concentration founded on desire" (and likewise for persistence, intent, and discrimination) refers to a state of singleness of mind in which that particular quality is the dominant condition, always accompanied by the four right exertions as the "fabrications of exertion."

§66 (SN 51:20, condensed) — The extended formula in full: desire (and likewise persistence, intent, and discrimination) must be tuned so as to be neither overly sluggish (mixed with laziness), overly active (mixed with restlessness), inwardly constricted (mixed with sloth and drowsiness), nor outwardly scattered (stirred up by sensual desire). Perceiving "front as behind" is explained as a well-attended, well-considered perception refined through discernment; perceiving "above as below" is explained through the standard anatomical reflection on the body's parts; dwelling "by night as by day" means applying the very same meditative themes and techniques regardless of the hour; and developing a "brightened mind" means firmly establishing the perception of light. Mastery of all four bases along these lines is said to yield the complete range of the six higher knowledges described above.

§67 (SN 51:15) — The brahman Uṇṇābha objects to Ānanda that a path meant to abandon desire, itself built from desire, must be an endless, self-defeating loop. Ānanda answers by pointing to the desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination one has for reaching a park — all of which are naturally allayed the moment the park is actually reached. In just the same way, an Arahant's desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination for the attainment of Arahantship are naturally allayed the moment Arahantship is actually attained; the path, Uṇṇābha then agrees, does indeed have an end rather than being endless.

§68 (SN 51:22) — Ven. Ānanda asks whether the Buddha has personally experienced traveling to the Brahmā world both by means of a "mind-made body" and by means of his own ordinary physical body composed of the four elements. The Buddha confirms both, explaining that when body and mind are thoroughly merged through sustained perception of ease and buoyancy, the physical body itself becomes lighter, more pliant, and more radiant — likened to an iron ball heated all day, or a wisp of cotton down lifted effortlessly on the wind — enabling it to rise from the earth and perform the same range of supranormal feats described earlier, extending as far as the Brahmā worlds.

Reflections for Practice

Modern readers, understandably, often approach the material on supranormal powers with some combination of skepticism and unease, unsure whether to read the described feats literally, symbolically, or simply as inherited cultural furniture attached to an otherwise practical set of teachings. Whatever position a given reader takes on that question, the structure the texts impose around these powers is worth taking seriously in its own right, independent of how the powers themselves are interpreted. The consistent message is one of subordination: whatever value these attainments might have, they are explicitly ranked below, and are said to be entirely dependent on, the ordinary mechanics of concentration already described under the frames of reference. Nothing about the bases of power introduces a shortcut around that earlier training; if anything, the bar is raised, since the extended formula's tuning requirements (avoiding sluggishness, over-activity, constriction, and scattering) demand an even more precise control of the relevant mental qualities than the frames of reference required on their own.

The Buddha's explicit prohibition on public displays of these powers, and his stated reasoning — that no feat of levitation or mind-reading could match the impact of a teaching that simply works when practiced — is worth sitting with regardless of one's view on the powers' literal reality, since it reflects a broader stance found throughout this collection: that the measure of genuine spiritual accomplishment is a change in the quality of one's own mind, not an external, demonstrable feat. Applied more broadly, this suggests a useful check for practitioners who find themselves drawn to unusual or dramatic experiences in meditation — visions, altered states, a sense of expanded perception — the relevant question the texts encourage asking is not "was this experience impressive" but "did passion, aversion, or delusion diminish as a result of it."

The dialogue with Uṇṇābha in §67 addresses an objection that arises naturally to anyone encountering Buddhist practice for the first time: if the goal is to abandon desire, how can a path built from desire — the desire to meditate, to attain awakening, to abandon desire itself — ever reach an actual conclusion, rather than simply generating a new object of craving to replace the old one? Ānanda's answer, that desire for a destination is naturally and automatically allayed on arrival, without any further act of renunciation being required, offers a genuinely practical reassurance for practitioners who worry that their own motivation to practice is itself a subtle form of the very grasping the practice is meant to undo. The texts do not ask a student to feel guilty about wanting to progress; they simply note that this particular kind of wanting is self-limiting by nature, allayed by its own fulfillment rather than requiring separate treatment.

Taken as a whole, the four subchapters gathered in this abridgment describe a single continuous movement rather than four separate techniques to be learned in sequence and then set aside: a stable ethical foundation makes concentration possible; the four frames of reference supply the

object and the method of that concentration; the four right exertions supply the quality of effort needed to sustain and refine it; and the four bases of power describe what that concentration looks like once thoroughly mastered, together with the same three-stage discipline — focus, causal mastery, and final letting go — required to keep even mastery itself from becoming one more thing to cling to. Read this way, the seven sets are less a set of instructions to be checked off than a single description, offered from four different angles, of what it actually looks like for a mind to become free.

Comparing the Four Sets

The subchapters that precede this comparison were presented in the order the source material itself follows — first establishing why the seven sets as a whole are called treasures, then working through mindfulness, effort, and concentration in turn — rather than in an order optimized for a first-time reader's ease of entry. Readers who found subchapter A's discussion of causal chains and numerical symbolism heavy going on a first pass are encouraged not to let that difficulty stand in the way of proceeding to subchapters B, C, and D, since much of subchapter A's more abstract material becomes considerably more concrete once read back against the specific practices those later subchapters describe.

Having gone through subchapters A through D in sequence, it is worth pausing to compare the four sets side by side rather than only in the order the source material presents them, since a few relationships only become visible once all four are held in view at once.

The four frames of reference and the four right exertions are easy to mistake for competitors, since both claim to describe the core of meditative practice — one centered on mindfulness, the other on effort. The texts gathered above suggest they are better understood as two descriptions of the same activity from different vantage points. Ardency, the quality of applied effort within frames-of-reference practice, is explicitly identified with right exertion; there is no frame-of-reference practice that lacks a right-exertion component, and no right exertion that isn't, in practice, exercised with respect to some chosen frame. The distinction between the two sets is therefore less a distinction of separate activities and more a distinction of which question is currently being asked: "what am I attending to, and how," as under the frames of reference, or "what is my effort actually accomplishing, and is it well tuned," as under the right exertions.

The four bases of power stand in a slightly different relationship to the other two: rather than describing a parallel facet of the same practice, they describe what happens when that practice, already well established through the frames of reference and rightly exerted effort, is carried to a very high degree of refinement. This is reflected structurally in the bases of power's own

formula, which explicitly incorporates "the fabrications of exertion" — that is, the four right exertions — as one of its own components, and which unfolds through the same three-stage arc (focused attention, active causal mastery, final non-fashioning) already introduced under the frames of reference. Nothing in the bases of power asks a practitioner to set aside what came before; it simply asks that the same skills be applied with greater precision and sustained over a longer arc of practice.

A further point of comparison concerns the relationship between desire and effort across the sets. Ordinary usage tends to treat "desire" as suspect and "effort" or "discipline" as virtuous, but the material above resists that easy division. Desire appears as an explicit, named component of the bases of power, standing on equal footing with persistence, intent, and discrimination, and the right exertions likewise open with the instruction to "generate desire" as their very first move. The relevant distinction the texts draw is not between having desire and having none, but between desire aimed at an outcome one cannot directly control (which breeds frustration) and desire aimed at putting the actual causes for that outcome in order in the present moment (which becomes an indispensable part of the path). This distinction runs quietly beneath all four subchapters and is worth keeping in mind whenever the texts speak approvingly of desire, intent, or ardor without the reader's more familiar suspicion of those same qualities kicking in by habit.

A final point worth drawing out concerns discernment's unusually mobile role across the four subchapters, already flagged in the essay under subchapter A but easy to lose sight of once the discussion moves into the more concrete territory of subchapters B through D. Discernment shows up at the very start of practice, in the ordinary, hearsay-based knowledge of what is skillful and unskillful that right exertion depends on to even begin discriminating between states worth cultivating and states worth abandoning; it shows up again in the middle, as the active, experimental sensitivity to cause and effect that drives the second stage of frames-of-reference practice and the tuning instructions given for the bases of power; and it shows up a third time at the very end, as the transcendent "clear knowing" that crowns the process altogether. No other single quality among mindfulness, effort, and concentration recurs in quite this way at every stage of the arc described across all four subchapters, which is part of why the essay in subchapter A singles discernment out, quoting the Buddha's own description of it as chief among the wings to awakening.

Frequently Raised Questions

Why does the same set of five qualities appear twice, as both faculties and strengths?

This question is addressed directly in the essay under subchapter A, but it recurs often enough to warrant repeating in summary form. The most widely cited explanation treats the duplication as marking two different intensities of the same five underlying qualities — conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment — with the "faculty" level sufficient to establish a practitioner on the path to stream-entry and the "strength" level required for the full maturity of Arahantship. A secondary explanation treats the duplication as serving a numerical purpose, ensuring that the total count of factors across all seven sets reaches thirty-seven, a number carrying independent symbolic weight in the wider culture the Buddha was teaching within. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and the source material presents them side by side rather than insisting on one over the other.

If mindfulness is supposed to be non-judgmental, why does right effort ask a practitioner to actively abandon some states and cultivate others?

The apparent tension dissolves once mindfulness and right exertion are recognized as answering different questions rather than competing instructions. Mindfulness's job, within the frames of reference, is accurate, non-distorted awareness of what is actually present — a job that genuinely does require setting aside premature judgment, since a distorted or defensive awareness cannot serve as a reliable frame of reference for anything else. Right exertion's job begins only after that accurate awareness is in place, and concerns what is then done with what has been accurately noticed. The texts nowhere suggest that noticing an unskillful state and then working to abandon it are in conflict; if anything, §58's mirror simile suggests that accurate, non-defensive noticing is precisely the precondition for effective, non-reactive abandonment, since a state that has been distorted or denied at the level of bare awareness cannot be skillfully worked with at the level of effort.

Are the supranormal powers described under the bases of power meant to be taken literally?

The source material itself does not hedge on this question — the powers are presented as real capacities some practitioners develop, complete with detailed formulas and similes explaining their mechanics. This abridgment has represented that material as presented, without adding an interpretive layer either affirming or explaining away the powers' literal reality, since doing so would go beyond what a condensation of the source text can responsibly claim. What can be said with more confidence, because the texts state it explicitly and repeatedly, is the structural point emphasized in subchapter D's closing reflections: whatever view a reader takes on the powers themselves, the texts consistently subordinate them to ordinary ethical and meditative

development, explicitly forbid their use for display, and treat only the sixth of the six — the ending of the mental effluents — as strictly necessary to the path.

Why do so many of these passages rely on similes rather than direct, abstract statements?

Almost every passage summarized in this abridgment leans on at least one concrete image — a hen incubating eggs, a bronze bowl left dirty or kept clean, a wild elephant bound to a post, a bowl of oil carried past a crowd, a quail returning to its home field. This is not incidental stylistic decoration; it reflects a broader feature of how this material seems to have been meant to function. An abstract formula such as the four right exertions can be memorized and recited without ever being understood in a way that changes how a person actually practices, whereas a vivid image tends to stay with a listener and continues doing interpretive work long after the original occasion for hearing it has passed. Readers who find a formula difficult to hold onto in the midst of actual practice often find that the accompanying simile, rather than the formula's technical wording, is what surfaces first and does the most practical good in the moment.

How much of this is realistic to attempt outside a monastic setting?

The source material is addressed throughout to a monastic audience, and several of its recommendations — extended night-time wakefulness, for instance, or the systematic charnel-ground contemplations — assume a degree of time, seclusion, and institutional support not typically available to a layperson balancing work and family obligations. That said, a considerable portion of the material translates directly regardless of setting: the basic formula for mindfulness of breathing, the periodic self-examination described in §58, the distinction between directing and not directing the mind in §36, and the general principle of matching the intensity of one's effort to the task and one's own present capacity, described at the close of the essay in subchapter C, require no institutional setting at all, only sustained personal commitment.

What is the relationship between the numbers four, five, seven, and eight used across the individual sets, and the overall count of thirty-seven?

Counted individually, the seven sets contribute four factors (the frames of reference), four (the right exertions), four (the bases of power), five (the faculties), five (the strengths), seven (the awakening factors), and eight (the path factors) — a sum of thirty-seven only once the duplication between the faculties and the strengths is left in place rather than treated as redundant. This is precisely why the essay in subchapter A treats the duplication of the five faculties and five strengths as worth explaining rather than dismissing as an oddity of transmission: removing it would also remove the numerical total of thirty-seven that later tradition, rightly or wrongly, came to treat as symbolically significant in its own right. Whether the number thirty-seven was itself the Buddha's organizing principle, or whether it was instead a

byproduct of a doctrinal structure arrived at for other reasons and only later recognized as numerically resonant, is not something the source material claims to settle definitively.

Numbers and Symbolism in the Teaching

Readers unfamiliar with the numerical patterning that runs through this material — four frames, four exertions, four bases, five faculties, five strengths, seven factors, eight path factors, thirty-seven in total — sometimes wonder whether these particular numbers carry any significance beyond simple enumeration, or whether the Buddha might just as easily have organized the same content into six sets or nine. The essay in subchapter A takes this question seriously rather than treating it as incidental, and the explanations offered there are worth drawing together in one place.

The number seven, applied to the sets themselves, is tied in the source material to two separate strands of contemporary symbolism: the seven treasures traditionally said to belong to a universal monarch, and the seven recognized systems for tuning a musical scale, with all other tunings considered discordant by comparison. Both associations converge on a similar idea — that seven represented a kind of complete, canonical set, whether of royal regalia or of legitimate ways to bring an instrument into tune, and the Buddha's use of the same number for his own central teachings borrows and extends that existing association, casting his teaching as offering every legitimate "tuning" by which a person might bring their own mind into harmony with the truth.

The number thirty-seven, reached only once the five faculties and five strengths are both counted despite repeating the same five factors, is tied to an older mathematical tradition in which multiplication tables used for tuning musical instruments to reciprocal scales were arranged in hexagonal patterns with a single central member surrounded by three rings of six, twelve, and eighteen further members — thirty-seven in total. The same number turns up in tables underlying early trigonometry and astronomy, and, outside the Indian context entirely, as the number of guardians in Plato's ideal city in the Laws. None of this amounts to proof that the Buddha had this specific numerical tradition in mind, and the essay in subchapter A is careful to present it as one plausible explanation among several rather than a settled fact — but it offers a useful reminder that ancient numerical symbolism often carried meanings, tied to mathematics, music, and astronomy alike, that are easy for a modern reader to miss entirely.

Does developing one of the seven sets in isolation risk neglecting the others, since the source material insists so strongly on their interdependence?

This concern comes up often enough among readers newly introduced to the seven-sets framework that it deserves direct treatment. The essay in subchapter A addresses a version of it directly, describing the holographic relationship among the frames of reference, right exertions, and bases of power, in which each set's own formal definition already incorporates the functional work of the other two. The practical implication is reassuring rather than daunting: a practitioner who takes up sustained mindfulness of the breath, for example, is not thereby neglecting right effort, since ardency — the very quality that keeps attention returning to the breath rather than wandering — simply is right exertion under another name, exercised in that specific context. The risk of neglect the question raises would be real if the seven sets described seven genuinely separate activities requiring separate blocks of practice time; the texts consistently suggest instead that they describe seven different ways of examining a single, continuous training, so that depth in any one tends to produce at least some degree of depth in the others as a natural consequence, rather than at their expense.

Glossary of Key Terms

The following short glossary gathers the recurring Pali terms and their working English equivalents as used throughout this abridgment, for readers who want a quick point of reference rather than searching back through the full text.

Ardency (ātappa): the quality of applied, sustained effort within meditation practice; identified in the essay above with right exertion, and named as one of the three qualities (with alertness and mindfulness) that define the first stage of frames-of-reference practice.

Alertness (sampajañña): clear, present-moment awareness of what is actually happening, as distinct from mindfulness's role of simply remembering to keep the chosen object in view; closely associated with discernment.

Bases of power (iddhipāda): the fourth of the seven sets, describing how concentration founded on desire, persistence, intent, or discrimination can be developed to a very high degree of mastery, potentially including supranormal abilities but centrally including the ending of the mental effluents.

Dhamma (as used for the fourth frame of reference): rendered here as "mental quality," referring most centrally to the five hindrances (as obstacles to be abandoned) and the seven factors for awakening (as qualities to be developed); a broader sense of the word, meaning "phenomenon"

generally, is also attested but is argued in the essay above to be secondary to this narrower, practice-oriented sense in this particular context.

Discernment (paññā): wisdom or understanding, ranging from ordinary knowledge of what is skillful and unskillful up through the fully liberating insight into the four noble truths; described in the essay on the treasures of the teaching as chief among the wings to awakening.

Effluents (āsava): deep-seated mental outflows or fermentations — sensuality, becoming, and ignorance are the most commonly named — whose complete ending constitutes full Awakening; the sixth and highest of the powers described under the bases of power.

Fabrications (saṅkhāra): mental, verbal, or bodily processes that actively construct or shape experience; "fabrications of exertion" refers specifically to the four right exertions as they operate within the bases of power.

Faculties, five (indriya): conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, treated as capacities to be developed; identical in content to the five strengths but understood as operating at a less mature intensity.

Frames of reference, four (satipaṭṭāna): the body, feelings, the mind, and mental qualities, taken up "in and of themselves" as objects of sustained, ardent, alert, mindful attention; treated at length in subchapter B.

Jhāna: a state of strong meditative absorption or concentration, arising through the successful practice of any of the frames of reference and treated throughout as a necessary support for liberating discernment, even where not explicitly named in a given passage.

Mindfulness (sati): the capacity to keep something — a chosen object, a task, a precept — in mind without forgetting or drifting away from it; described as necessary at every stage of practice, from the maintenance of virtue through to the refinements of concentration.

Non-fashioning (atammayatā): the culminating equipoise in which no further mental, verbal, or bodily activity is being invested in the construction of further experience; the immediate threshold before release into the Unfabricated.

Right exertions, four (sammāppadhāna): guarding against the arising of unskillful qualities, abandoning those already arisen, developing skillful qualities not yet arisen, and maintaining and perfecting those already present; treated at length in subchapter C.

Strengths, five (bala): identical in content to the five faculties (conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment), but understood as the same five qualities operating at the higher intensity required for full Arahantship.

Unfabricated (asaṅkhata): a term for Unbinding (nibbāna) itself, emphasizing that, unlike every stage of the path leading to it, it is not itself something constructed or caused to arise, and so cannot be produced directly by desire, effort, or any other fabricated activity, however skillful.

Wings to awakening (bodhipakkhiyā dhammā): the collective name, adopted in early post-canonical literature and retained ever since, for the seven sets taken together; discussed at length in subchapter A, including the evidence, and the degree of uncertainty, surrounding whether the Buddha himself used this precise term for the group.

Skillful / unskillful (kusala / akusala): the basic ethical and psychological vocabulary used throughout this material in place of a strict moral vocabulary of right and wrong; a mental state, word, or action is "skillful" to the degree that it is free of greed, aversion, and delusion and tends toward beneficial results, and "unskillful" to the degree that it is rooted in one or more of those three qualities and tends toward harm.

Sublime attitudes (brahma-vihāra): good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, described in subchapter A as qualities that both support and are supported by the practice of virtue, and appearing again in subchapter B's discussion of equanimity as a factor for awakening.

Index of Discourses Cited

The following list gathers, in the order they appear above, every discourse and collection cited in this abridgment, together with the paragraph numbers under which each is summarized, so that a reader working from the original Pali Canon or from a full translation of the source anthology can locate the corresponding passage without searching through the whole text.

From the Aṅguttara Nikāya (“Numerical Discourses”): AN 8:19 (§18), AN 7:68 (§20), AN 5:56 (§21), AN 3:16 (§22), AN 9:1 (§23), AN 8:81 (§26), AN 1:225 and following (§42), AN 4:14 (§50), AN 5:53 (§52), AN 10:51 (§58).

From the Dīgha Nikāya (“Long Discourses”): DN 16 (§§19, 48), DN 18 (§32), and DN 2 as combined with SN 51:26 (§64).

From the Itivuttaka (“The Buddha’s Sayings”): Iti 82 (§24), Iti 97 (§25), Iti 16 (§53), Iti 17 (§54), Iti 34 (§55).

From the Majjhima Nikāya (“Middle-Length Discourses”): MN 10 (§30), MN 118 (§31), MN 125 (§33), MN 2 (§51), MN 101 (§59), MN 66 (§60), MN 78 (§61), MN 5 (§57).

From the Saṃyutta Nikāya (“Connected Discourses”): SN 47:16 (§27), SN 47:35 (§28), SN 47:40 (§29), SN 47:4 (§34), SN 47:8 (§35), SN 47:10 (§36), SN 47:6 and 47:7 (§§37–38), SN 35:206 (§39), SN 47:20 (§40), SN 47:37 (§43), SN 54:10 (§44), SN 52:1 (§45), SN 47:19 (§47), SN 49:1 (§49), SN 16:2 (§56), SN 1:1 (§62), SN 51:2 (§63), SN 51:13 (§65), SN 51:20 (§66), SN 51:15 (§67), SN 51:22 (§68).

From the Udāna (“Inspired Utterances”): Ud 3:5 (§41).

Passages marked with a companion reference in the essay text (for instance, AN 5:144 alongside SN 52:1 under §§45–46) are treated together in the corresponding summary above, since the source anthology itself presents them as a paired unit rather than as separate entries.

Key Similes at a Glance

The following list gathers the principal similes used across the summarized passages, organized by subchapter, for readers who recall an image but not the paragraph number or the point it illustrated.

Subchapter A: the ocean's many treasures, for the seven sets as a whole (§18); the hen incubating her eggs, the worn adze handle, and the weathered ship's rigging, all for the necessity and gradual, often imperceptible progress of sustained practice (§20).

Subchapter B: the tree with and without branches and leaves, for the dependence of the whole path on mindfulness and alertness (§26); the skillful and unskillful cook, for attentiveness to whether one's practice is actually working (§35); the elephant bound to a post, for how the frames of reference break old habitual patterns (§33); the six animals tied by a rope, for how body-mindfulness settles the pull of the six senses (§39); the bowl of oil carried past a crowd, for total, unwavering absorption (§40); the quail returning to its home field and the monkey caught in a tar trap, for staying within one's proper meditative range (§§37–38); the dust pile leveled by a cart from any direction, for the equal effectiveness of any of the four frames (§44); and the bamboo acrobat and his assistant Frying Pan, for the relationship between protecting oneself and protecting others (§47).

Subchapter C: the River Ganges sloping toward the sea, for how the right exertions naturally incline the mind toward Unbinding (§49); the bronze bowl kept clean or left to gather dust, for recognizing and responding to one's own internal blemishes (§57); the mirror used to check for dirt on one's own face, for periodic self-examination (§58); the jealous man freed of his distress once he abandons his desire, and the fletcher heating and straightening an arrow shaft only as long as needed, both for matching the intensity of effort to the task at hand (§59); the water drops vanishing almost instantly off a sun-heated pan, for swiftly self-correcting mindfulness (§60); and the sleeping infant, invoked and then set aside, for why mere non-wrongdoing does not by itself define genuine skillfulness (§61).

Subchapter D: the potter, ivory-carver, and goldsmith shaping already-prepared material, for the ease of the supranormal bodily powers once properly developed (§64); the traveler recognizing different instruments along a road, for the divine ear (§64); the mirror again, here for knowledge of others' minds (§64); remembering one's route through a series of villages, for recollection of past lives (§64); a high vantage point over a town square, for the divine eye (§64); a clear mountain pool showing shells and fish, for the ending of the effluents (§64); and the iron ball heated all day, alongside a wisp of cotton down lifted on the wind, both for the Buddha's own bodily lightness and buoyancy in the exercise of these powers (§68).

A Suggested Study Sequence

Readers approaching this material for personal practice rather than academic study may also find it useful to keep a short written record, over a period of some weeks, of which of the recurring similes above actually comes to mind unprompted during ordinary daily activity — while waiting, while frustrated, while distracted. Noticing which image surfaces on its own is often a more reliable guide to which section of this abridgment is currently most relevant to one's own practice than any amount of further reading, since it reflects what the mind has already, on its own, found worth holding onto.

Readers using this abridgment as a basis for actual study, rather than a single continuous read-through, sometimes find it useful to have a suggested order and pacing, since the density of the material varies considerably from section to section. What follows is one reasonable approach, offered as a starting point rather than a fixed prescription.

A first pass might read straight through the overview and all four subchapter essays without stopping to absorb the numbered passages in detail, treating this as an orientation to the overall architecture — how the seven sets relate to one another, why virtue underlies all of them, and how the three-stage pattern of focused attention, active causal mastery, and final non-fashioning recurs across the frames of reference, the right exertions, and the bases of power alike. The point of this first pass is simply to come away with a working mental map, not to memorize any particular formula.

A second pass might work through subchapter B in real depth, since the four frames of reference supply the object and method that the following two subchapters build on, and since this is the section of the material most directly translatable into a personal meditation practice. Readers with an existing sitting practice may find it useful to deliberately try applying, in actual practice, the distinction between the three stages described in the essay — first simply staying with the chosen frame, then experimenting with what helps or hinders settling into it, and only then allowing the practice to rest in a lighter, more open form of bare knowing — rather than reading the three stages only as an abstract description.

A third pass might return to subchapters A, C, and D with the frames of reference now more concretely understood, since a good deal of what the essays on the treasures of the teaching, the right exertions, and the bases of power say about mindfulness, concentration, and jhāna will read quite differently once those terms are anchored to an actual, remembered experience of practice rather than remaining purely conceptual.

Throughout, the numbered passage summaries are best treated as an index pointing back toward the fuller source material rather than as a substitute for it. A reader who finds a particular

summary especially resonant — the cook simile, the two acrobats, the man crossing the flood — will generally get more out of seeking out the full passage in the unabridged source than out of any amount of further commentary added here.

Afterword

This abridgment has deliberately limited itself to the portion of the source material covering the treasures of the teaching, the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, and the four bases of power, since these are the sections available for condensation here and together form a coherent, self-contained unit — the three sets built respectively around mindfulness, effort, and concentration, framed by the essay explaining why the seven sets as a whole are called treasures in the first place. The full traditional collection continues on to treat the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the noble eightfold path, completing the causal, self-reinforcing chains only briefly outlined here in the discussion of the treasures of the teaching; readers drawn to this material are encouraged to continue with the complete source text for that remaining material, which this abridgment has not attempted to summarize.

Throughout, the aim has been to preserve the shape, sequence, and central arguments of the original essays and discourse selections while presenting them in substantially condensed and thoroughly reworded form, and while keeping the same overall chapter and subchapter structure the source material itself follows. Readers who find a particular passage summary intriguing are encouraged to seek out the full discourse it summarizes, since a great deal of the source material's persuasive power lies in details — similes worked out at length, careful step-by-step formulas, the specific rhythm of question-and-answer dialogues — that a condensed guide of this kind can only gesture toward rather than fully convey.

If a single thread is worth carrying forward from all four subchapters together, it is the insistence, repeated in one form or another throughout, that none of this training is meant to remain theoretical. The treasures of the teaching are treasures because they are meant to be used; the frames of reference are frames precisely because they orient actual, moment-to-moment attention rather than merely describing attention in the abstract; the right exertions exist because good intentions alone do not reliably translate into abandoned defilements and cultivated skillful qualities without deliberate, sustained effort; and even the most extraordinary powers described under the fourth set are explicitly subordinated to the same ordinary, practical measure applied throughout — whether a given practice actually reduces passion, aversion, and delusion in the mind of the person practicing it. That standard, plain and repeatedly restated, is offered throughout the source material as the one test every reader is equipped to apply for themselves.

Finally, a word on the limits of any abridgment of this kind. Condensation necessarily flattens some of what makes the original material effective — the cumulative weight of a long list of similes read one after another, the deliberate repetition that lets a formula sink in through sheer familiarity, the sense of encountering a living dialogue between named individuals rather than a summarized position. Nothing in this abridgment should be taken as a replacement for that fuller

encounter; it is offered instead as a map, useful for orientation and for locating the sections most worth a reader's sustained attention, but no substitute for walking the actual ground it describes.

The Wings to Awakening

An Abridged Study Guide

Part II: The Seven Sets (E–H)

The Five Faculties · The Five Strengths · The Seven Factors for Awakening · The Noble Eightfold Path

How to Use This Guide

Each of the four main sections below follows the same layout as the source: an "Overview" that condenses the commentary into shortened, paraphrased form, followed by a "Key Passages" list that summarizes — rather than quotes — the canonical suttas the commentary draws on. Subsection headings within each Overview mirror the natural divisions of the original discussion (for example, the treatment of conviction as a starting point, or the treatment of appropriate attention within the factors for awakening) so that a reader moving between this guide and the source text can locate the corresponding material quickly. A short cross-reference section after the four main parts draws out the pattern that connects all four sets, a glossary collects the Pali technical vocabulary used throughout, and a set of study questions closes the guide for readers who want to test their own grasp of the material before returning to the full canonical translations.

Contents

- II. The Seven Sets
- E. The Five Faculties
- F. The Five Strengths
- G. The Seven Factors for Awakening
- H. The Noble Eightfold Path
- Cross-References Among the Four Sets
- Study Questions
- Glossary of Key Pali Terms

- Appendix A: The Seven Sets at a Glance
- Suggested Order of Study
- Appendix B: Frequently Confused Terms
- Note on This Abridgment

II. The Seven Sets

The four sets treated in this guide — the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the noble eightfold path — round out the traditional list of seven sets that together make up the "wings to awakening." Where the earlier sets (the four frames of reference, the four right exertions, and the four bases of power) are described as holographic, each one containing in miniature the whole of the path, these four sets are better understood as causal loops: sequences in which one quality gives rise to the next, which in turn feeds back to strengthen the first. Taken together, they view the same territory from four different angles, moving from an initial, largely borrowed trust in the teaching, through effort, mindfulness, and concentration, to a discernment that is no longer borrowed but directly and personally seen.

Each of the four sets pairs its list of qualities with one animating principle that drives the whole cycle forward: heedfulness for the faculties and strengths, appropriate attention for the factors for awakening, and a supporting trio of right view, right effort, and right mindfulness for the noble eightfold path. Watching how these animating principles differ from set to set is one of the more useful ways of tracking what each set is actually emphasizing, since the five underlying qualities named across the sets overlap so heavily that, without attending to these differences, it would be easy to mistake four distinct lenses for needless repetition.

This guide assumes some familiarity with the three sets treated earlier in the larger work — the four frames of reference (mindfulness applied to the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities), the four right exertions (effort directed at preventing, abandoning, developing, and maintaining skillful and unskillful states), and the four bases of power (desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination, each brought to a state of concentration). Those three sets are described in the source as holographic, in that each one, fully practiced, already implies the whole of the path; the four sets taken up here build on them and, in the case of the eightfold path, explicitly fold all three back in as supporting structure.

E. The Five Faculties

Overview

The Pali word rendered "faculty," indriya, shares a root with Indra, chief of the Vedic gods, and so carries connotations of governance or dominance. In this set the word names five mental qualities that must each come to dominate the mind before awakening can occur: conviction (saddhā), persistence (viriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and discernment (paññā). This list is the most inclusive of all the sets making up the wings to awakening, since it names every factor found in the sets already covered and adds one that the others only imply: conviction. For this reason the set of five faculties supplies the organizing framework for the fuller treatment of conviction, concentration, and discernment found later in the larger work.

Two of the five faculties — mindfulness and persistence — correspond exactly to sets covered in detail elsewhere: mindfulness to the four frames of reference, and persistence to the four right exertions. The remaining three, conviction, concentration, and discernment, receive extended treatment of their own later on. Here the emphasis falls on the set as a whole: a loop running from conviction, through persistence, mindfulness, and concentration, to discernment, which in its transcendent form confirms the very conviction that started the sequence and thereby drives the whole cycle to a deeper level.

Conviction as the Starting Point

The faculty of conviction is defined in the texts as equivalent to the four qualities that lead to, or characterize, stream-entry. Two versions of this list appear side by side. One names the conditions that lead a person toward the

first taste of awakening: associating with admirable people, listening to genuine teaching, attending to it appropriately, and practicing in line with what one has heard. The other describes the confirmed confidence of someone who has already broken through: unwavering conviction in the Buddha's awakening, in the soundness of his teaching, and in the good conduct of those who have practiced it well, together with a virtue that other observant people would find praiseworthy and that leads naturally toward concentration.

Conviction in this system is not a single, simple attitude, and Western attempts to isolate a dominant strand of Buddhist faith — trust, belief, or willingness to act — tend to miss the point. Because the object of conviction (the Buddha's awakening) is itself a claim about how the mind's own actions shape experience, these three strands cannot really be separated: to trust the teacher is already to trust a specific claim about cause and effect, and to trust that claim is already to feel the pull to test it in one's own conduct. This differs sharply from a model of faith centered on a savior's grace or on unquestioning obedience rewarded from outside; trusting this teaching is precisely what commits a person to taking responsibility for their own release, since the teaching itself holds that liberation is a matter of what one does with one's own mind.

From Conviction to Discernment

Because conviction is inseparable from a willingness to act, it naturally develops into persistence — sustained effort to abandon what is unskillful and cultivate what is skillful. Persistence properly applied cultivates mindfulness, and steady mindfulness in turn matures into concentration, culminating in the four levels of jhāna. The stability of concentration then provides the basis on which discernment can arise, first in ordinary, everyday forms and eventually in the breakthrough insight that confirms, through direct experience, what before had only been taken on trust. That confirmation feeds back into conviction, strengthening it and driving the cycle onward through further refinements of the same five qualities, all the way to full awakening, at which point conviction is no longer needed because its object has been directly and permanently verified.

Underlying the entire loop is heedfulness (appamāda) — a combination of restraint, sustained mindfulness, and effort that stays alert to the real dangers inherent in careless action. Heedfulness supplies both the urgency and the precision that drive a serious practice, and the tradition treats it as the single quality on whose presence the full maturing of all five faculties depends. The famous verse contrasting heedfulness, which leads toward the deathless, with heedlessness, which leads toward death, captures this same point, and the Buddha's own reported final exhortation to his monks made heedfulness the last word of his teaching career. The pattern also echoes the story of the future Buddha's own quest: it began with his refusal to resign himself to the inevitability of aging, illness, and death, and ended in the very discernment that brought him release from that tyranny.

Using the Faculties Skillfully

Two further themes recur in the texts on this set: balance and letting go. The well-known simile of the musician, traditionally told about the monk Soṇa, makes the point about balance directly: effort that is strung too tight produces agitation, effort left too slack produces laziness, and only when the strings are tuned neither too taut nor too loose can the instrument be played well. In the same way, a meditator must find the right pitch of effort and then bring the remaining faculties into tune with it before taking up the actual object of meditation, the four frames of reference, much as a musician settles on a scale before playing a piece.

On the theme of letting go, one passage makes clear that mastery of the faculties is not complete until a person can also discern the way beyond them — including beyond concentration and discernment themselves. These qualities are skillful precisely because their full development opens onto something beyond skillfulness as a fixed achievement: a view that does not cling even to its own correctness. This is the same insight elaborated later in the discussion of right view, that the rightness of right view lies precisely in its capacity to release its own grip, allowing the mind to know without holding on to what it knows — a "knowing but not holding" that the tradition treats as the doorway to unbinding.

Weak and Acute Faculties; Learner and Adept

Not everyone's faculties are equally developed, and the texts classify practice accordingly into four combinations: practice that feels painful or pleasant, crossed with intuition that comes slowly or quickly. Someone of an intensely passionate, aversive, or deluded temperament tends to experience practice as painful; someone without such intensity tends to experience it as comparatively pleasant. Independently of that, someone whose five faculties are only weakly present reaches the breakthrough that ends the mental effluents slowly, while someone whose faculties are acute reaches it quickly. A companion passage recasts the same four combinations in terms of specific supports — perceiving the body as unattractive, perceiving food as unappetizing, finding no delight in the world, seeing all fabrications as inconstant, keeping death vividly in mind, or, on the pleasant side, resting in the four jhānas — again crossed with whether the practitioner's faculties are weak or acute.

A separate passage distinguishes a "learner," someone still in training, from an "adept," an arahant who has completed the training, by how each relates to the five faculties. A learner can recognize the value, outcome, and reward of the five faculties through discernment, but does not yet dwell touching them fully with the body — that is, has not yet fully embodied their realization. An adept discerns the same five faculties and does dwell touching them with the body, and in addition discerns that all six sense faculties will one day cease without remainder and that no further set of six will ever arise again.

Key Passages

- SN 48:8 names the five faculties and locates each one within a set already introduced elsewhere: conviction within the four factors of stream-entry, persistence within the four right exertions, mindfulness within the four frames of reference, concentration within the four jhānas, and discernment within the four noble truths.

- SN 55:5 and AN 10:92 give the two definitions of the "factors of stream-entry" described above — the conditions that lead toward it, and the qualities that mark someone who has already attained it, including verified confidence in the Buddha, the teaching, and the community of accomplished disciples.

- SN 48:10 offers formal definitions of all five faculties, describing persistence as sustained effort to prevent and abandon what is unskillful while generating and maintaining what is skillful, mindfulness as steady focus on the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, and discernment as insight into the arising and passing of things that leads toward the ending of suffering.

- AN 7:63 compares a disciple's five faculties, together with the four jhānas, to the defenses and stores of a frontier fortress: conviction as its foundation post, persistence as its garrison, mindfulness as its gatekeeper, discernment as its plastered ramparts, and the four jhānas as its stockpiles of grass, grain, beans, and tonics.

- SN 48:50 records a dialogue in which the Buddha leads Sāriputta through how a disciple's trust in the Buddha's awakening naturally gives rise, step by step, to persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and a discernment that eventually confirms, through direct bodily experience, what had earlier only been heard about — a confirmation that in turn deepens the original conviction.

- SN 48:52 uses the image of a roof's ridge-beam to show how discernment stabilizes the other four faculties, much as a ridge-beam keeps a house's rafters firm; until noble knowledge arises, the texts say, the first four faculties remain unsteady.

- SN 48:46 and SN 48:55 note that an arahant's declaration of full release rests specifically on noble discernment and noble release, and that discernment holds the leading place among all the qualities that serve as wings to awakening, much as red sandalwood is reckoned foremost among scented woods.

- SN 48:56, read together with AN 10:15, identifies heedfulness as the single quality whose presence brings the five faculties to full maturity, comparing its importance to the way an elephant's footprint encompasses those of every other land animal, or moonlight outshines the combined light of the stars.

- Dhp 21 gives the verse contrasting heedfulness, which leads toward the deathless, with heedlessness, which leads toward death, adding that the heedless are, in effect, already as good as dead.

- MN 131 advises against dwelling on the past or placing hope in the future, urging instead a clear, unshaken seeing of whatever quality is present, pursued with the same urgency a person might feel on being warned that death could come as early as tomorrow.

- AN 6:19 recounts the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness of death: monks who wish only to live long enough to finish a single mouthful of food, or a single in-and-out breath, are praised as practicing far more heedfully than those content merely to hope for a day and a night more of life.

- DN 16 records the Buddha's reported last words to his assembled monks, urging them to strive toward the goal through heedfulness.

- AN 4:162 and AN 4:163 classify four modes of practice by whether the experience of practicing feels painful or pleasant and whether insight arrives slowly or quickly, tracing the difference to a practitioner's underlying temperament and to whether their five faculties are, at the time, weak or acute.

- AN 6:55 tells the story of Venerable Soṇa, whose feet had split and bled from over-zealous walking meditation and who was on the verge of giving up the training. Using the image of tuning a stringed instrument, the Buddha teaches him to find the right pitch of effort rather than push himself to exhaustion or slacken off entirely; Soṇa takes the advice and goes on to attain arahantship.

- SN 48:53 distinguishes a "learner," someone still in training, from an "adept," an arahant, by whether a person merely understands the destiny and value of the five faculties through discernment or has come to know them through full, embodied realization, and further notes that an adept also discerns that the six sense faculties will one day cease entirely and never arise again.

- SN 48:3 and SN 48:5 state that a person becomes a stream-enterer, and eventually an arahant, by directly seeing the origin, passing away, allure, drawback, and escape with respect to each of the five faculties — including, notably, an "escape" from concentration and discernment themselves, not only from the more obviously problematic qualities.

- SN 48:44 records Sāriputta telling the Buddha that he no longer merely takes the value of the five faculties on conviction in someone else's word, because he has personally known, seen, penetrated, and realized it through discernment, and so has no remaining doubt or uncertainty.

F. The Five Strengths

Overview

The five strengths (bala) — conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment — name exactly the same five mental qualities as the five faculties. The change in vocabulary marks a difference in emphasis rather than in substance: as faculties, these qualities are described in terms of the dominance or governing power they exert over the mind; as strengths, they are described in terms of their capacity to withstand and overcome the opposing, unskillful tendencies that would otherwise pull practice off course. Conviction as a strength, for instance, is what resists doubt and wavering; persistence as a strength is what resists laziness and discouragement; mindfulness as a strength is what resists heedless forgetting; concentration as a strength is what resists distraction; and discernment as a strength is what resists the confusion and delusion that would otherwise cloud every other quality on the list.

A well-known simile compares the development of the five strengths to the way the river Ganges flows steadily eastward toward the sea: a monk who develops and pursues the five strengths, cultivating each one in dependence on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, and aimed throughout at letting go, likewise flows, slopes, and inclines toward unbinding, the way a river's whole downstream current is oriented in a single direction well before it reaches the coast. A separate passage settles any question about whether the faculties and the strengths name two different things by comparing them to a single river flowing around an island: depending on where the observer draws the boundary, the very same current can be reckoned as one stream or as two, east and west of the island, or north and south of it, yet the water itself never changes. In exactly the same way, whatever counts as the faculty of conviction is identical with what counts as the strength of conviction, and so on down the entire list — two vantage points on one and the same set of five qualities, chosen according to whether the emphasis at a given moment falls on governing the mind or on resisting what would otherwise overturn it.

Why List the Same Five Qualities Twice?

A natural question is why the tradition bothers to give the same five qualities two separate names and two separate treatments rather than simply discussing them once. The answer lies in what each framing makes easiest to notice in actual practice. Describing conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment as faculties draws attention to how they take charge of the mind, displacing the scattered, reactive tendencies that otherwise run the show — the framing is one of governance, of a rightful ruler asserting authority. Describing the same five qualities as strengths draws attention instead to their defensive, load-bearing capacity — the framing is one of a structure holding firm under pressure, resisting doubt, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction, and delusion as those pressures arise. A practitioner checking their own progress can usefully ask both questions in turn: are these qualities currently strong enough to govern the mind's overall direction, and are they currently strong enough to hold up against whatever specific difficulty has just arisen? The two questions probe the same five qualities but surface different information, which is presumably why the canon preserves both framings rather than collapsing them into one.

Key Passages

- SN 50:1 introduces the five strengths and compares their development — grounded in seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, and aimed at letting go — to the river Ganges flowing steadily toward the sea and, by extension, toward unbinding itself.

- SN 48:4 uses the simile of a river divided by an island to demonstrate that the five faculties and the five strengths are two complementary ways of naming a single set of qualities, distinguished only by the angle from which each is described, not by any difference in what they actually are.

G. The Seven Factors for Awakening

Overview

The seven factors for awakening (bojjhaṅga) — mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity — are closely bound up with the practice of the four frames of reference. The texts describe this relationship in two complementary ways. In the spiral pattern, mindfulness (understood as the practice of any one of the four frames of reference) leads to an analysis of qualities that distinguishes skillful from unskillful states; this analytical clarity calls forth persistence, which gives rise to a rapture not dependent on the physical senses; rapture calms body and mind into serenity; serenity allows the mind to settle into concentration; and concentration is then overseen with equanimity — an even-handed balance with regard to whatever feeling or object arises, not a flat or neutral feeling in itself. In the holographic pattern, by contrast, all seven factors are already implicit in the ordinary practice of any one of the four frames of reference, since every act of careful, mindful observation already involves some measure of each of the other six.

Compared with the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening emphasize a slightly different causal dynamic. Where the faculties describe how mindfulness and concentration together give rise to discernment, the factors for awakening describe how mindfulness and discernment (through the analysis of qualities) together give rise to concentration. This difference of emphasis is reflected in what each set treats as its single animating principle: heedfulness underlies the faculties and strengths, while appropriate attention (yoniso manasikāra) underlies the factors for awakening — a principle that, the texts say, grows out of the conviction implicit in the earlier set and matures into right view, the discernment-aggregate counterpart to heedfulness's role within the concentration aggregate.

Appropriate Attention

Appropriate attention — sometimes rendered "wise reflection" or "the proper approach" — is the skill of recognizing which questions are worth pursuing and which should be set aside because engaging with them only feeds mental agitation rather than resolving it. One passage sorts all possible questions into four types: those that deserve a straightforward, categorical answer because they are already well framed; those that need their terms clarified before a useful answer becomes possible; those that are better met with a counter-question, because the real difficulty lies in a confused line of thinking or a hidden agenda behind the question rather than in the question's stated content; and those that should simply be set aside, because both the question and the very act of asking it are so misguided that engaging further would only multiply mental effluents.

Of these four types, the class of questions meriting a categorical answer is the one most relevant to appropriate attention, since it supplies the actual content that attention should be directed toward: questions that help identify useful terms and categories, questions that place particular events correctly within those categories, and questions that trace the causal relationships between such events, including how one's own manner of questioning affects the mind. These three concerns map closely onto the three stages of frames-of-reference practice described elsewhere in the larger work, with the last of them — attention to how the questioning approach itself affects the mind — forming the overarching principle behind the entire fourfold classification of questions.

Developing appropriate attention with respect to the hindrances and the factors for awakening unfolds in three broad stages, corresponding to the three stages of frames-of-reference meditation. At first, a meditator simply learns to notice which of these qualities is present or absent from moment to moment, using ordinary, self-referential language such as "I feel restless" or "my mind is calm," because that is still the natural idiom available at this early stage and it usefully directs attention inward rather than outward toward the people or situations that provoked the feeling in the first place.

The second stage investigates how these qualities actually arise and pass away, guided by two complementary images: balance and nourishment. On the theme of balance, the more energizing factors — analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture — are best applied when the mind has grown sluggish, while the more calming factors —

serenity, concentration, and equanimity — are best applied when the mind has grown restless and scattered; mindfulness alone is described as useful at every time, since it is what allows a meditator to judge which kind of intervention a given moment actually calls for. On the theme of nourishment, the texts describe each hindrance and each factor for awakening as having its own specific "food": paying inappropriate attention to certain themes feeds the hindrances and starves the corresponding factors for awakening, while paying appropriate attention to the matching themes reverses the effect, feeding the awakening factors and starving the hindrances in their place. The pairing is especially direct between analysis of qualities and the hindrance of uncertainty, since feeding one factor of that pair necessarily starves the other.

In a third and final stage, the same inquiring attitude turns back on the assumptions built into the earlier stages, especially the sense of self implicit in phrases like "my mind" or "I am calm." Rather than asking whether a self ultimately exists or not — a question the Buddha is recorded as declining to answer directly, since either a flat yes or a flat no would only reinforce an assumption that itself causes suffering — the more productive line of inquiry asks whether a given experience is "mine," is "me," and whether regarding it that way would lead to suffering. These are questions that admit of clear, useful answers (no, no, and yes), and asking them gradually loosens the sense of ownership over both the hindrances and the awakening factors alike. What remains, once this shift is complete, is a purely descriptive awareness — simply noting that a quality is present, without any further story about who is experiencing it — which the tradition treats as the very threshold of awakening.

Each factor for awakening is said to reach its fullest maturity when developed in a way that depends on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, and results in letting go — language that applies equally to ordinary meditative absorption and to the transcendent breakthrough of awakening itself, underscoring the underlying continuity between the two levels rather than treating them as wholly separate achievements.

Key Passages

- SN 46:6, paralleled at MN 118, records the wanderer Kuṇḍaliya asking the Buddha what leads, step by step, to the fruit of clear knowing and release. The Buddha answers with a chain running from restraint of the senses, through the three forms of good conduct, the four frames of reference, and the seven factors for awakening, to clear knowing and release itself, and then walks through in detail how each of the four frames of reference, fully practiced, brings each of the seven factors to the culmination of its own development in turn.

- SN 54:2 applies the same sevenfold sequence specifically to mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, describing it as a practice of great fruit and great benefit precisely when each factor for awakening is developed dependent on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, and aimed at letting go.

- SN 46:52 explains a manner of counting the seven factors as fourteen, since each one can be applied either to qualities observed internally, within oneself, or to qualities observed externally, in others.

- AN 1:75–76 states that no single quality does more to prevent the awakening factors from arising and maturing than inappropriate attention, and no single quality does more to promote their arising and maturing than appropriate attention.

- SN 46:51 works through the five hindrances and seven awakening factors one by one, describing what "feeds" each and what "starves" it, tracing every instance back to whether the underlying attention is inappropriate or appropriate.

- SN 46:53 uses the image of tending a fire to explain when to apply the energizing factors and when to apply the calming ones: wet fuel will not revive a dying flame, and dry fuel poured onto a blaze will only make it worse, so a sluggish mind calls for the active factors — analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture — while a restless mind calls for the calming ones — serenity, concentration, and equanimity — with mindfulness described as beneficial in either condition.

- SN 46:54 connects each of the four "immeasurable" attitudes — good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity — when developed together with the seven factors for awakening, to a corresponding formless meditative attainment as its highest possible outcome for a practitioner who does not go on to a fully transcendent release.

- AN 10:95 has Ānanda tell the wanderer Uttiya that just as a city gatekeeper cannot count every individual creature passing through the gate but can still be certain that any large creature entering or leaving the city must use that single gate, the Buddha does not claim to know exactly how many beings in the cosmos will reach release, but does know with certainty that everyone who does so does it by abandoning the five hindrances, establishing the mind firmly in the four frames of reference, and developing the seven factors for awakening as they have actually come to be.

- Dhp 89 gives the verse describing those whose minds are fully developed in the factors for awakening, who take delight in non-clinging and in relinquishing what they had grasped, as reaching a radiant, unbound state with their mental effluents ended.

H. The Noble Eightfold Path

Overview

The noble eightfold path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration — is the most familiar formulation of Buddhist practice, reportedly taught by the Buddha to his very first students and again, near the end of his life, to his last. It earns the title "noble" because, once all eight factors converge in a fully mature form, they stand directly at the threshold of stream-entry, the first of the four transcendent attainments.

Like a physical path, the eightfold path is a means rather than an end in itself, and it leads toward the goal rather than causing that goal outright. On an initial, more effortful level, walking the path means consciously cultivating each of the eight qualities in turn, one step at a time. On a fully mature, or "noble," level, the path becomes something closer to a vehicle: the eight qualities converge together, at the point where the mind lets go of fabrication altogether, and that convergence itself carries the mind onward to the deathless rather than requiring further deliberate effort to arrive.

Three Aggregates, Mundane and Noble Levels

The eight factors are traditionally grouped under three aggregates: discernment (right view and right resolve), virtue (right speech, right action, and right livelihood), and concentration (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). The texts note, however, that while the eight factors fit neatly under these three aggregates, the reverse is not true — not every instance of virtue, concentration, or discernment counts automatically as a factor of the noble path, since wrong versions of virtue, concentration, and discernment also exist, and even their right versions must reach an advanced level of development before they qualify as genuinely "noble."

This point is reflected in the distinction the texts draw between mundane and noble, or transcendent, levels of each factor. Mundane right view, for example, is simply belief in the basic principles of kamma: that generosity has real value, that good and bad conduct carry genuine consequences, that there is meaningful continuity between this life and a next one, that a debt of gratitude is owed to one's parents, and that some people have genuinely and directly realized these truths for themselves through their own diligent practice. This mundane conviction underlies mundane right resolve, speech, action, and livelihood in turn, while mundane right effort, mindfulness, and concentration correspond directly to the faculties of persistence, mindfulness, and concentration discussed earlier. Right concentration, cultivated on this mundane level, then provides the stability needed for insight into the four noble truths — an insight that is simultaneously the faculty of discernment and the noble, transcendent form of right view itself.

Once right view reaches this transcendent level, the remaining seven factors are drawn up to the same level along with it. At that point, noble right resolve consists of the very qualities of directed thought, evaluation, and unified attention that belong to meditative absorption itself; noble right speech, action, and livelihood are defined not merely by external abstention from wrongdoing but by the actual state of mind of someone who has genuinely let go of the underlying impulse to lie, harm, or deceive; and noble right effort, mindfulness, and concentration are understood to converge, together with the other factors, in a single unified state in which — as one passage puts it — calm and insight operate together, in tandem, rather than as two separate and alternating exercises.

The Supporting Trio and the Path as a Whole

A further analysis describes how each individual factor of the path is fostered by a recurring trio of supporting qualities: right view, which distinguishes the wrong version of that particular factor from its right counterpart; right effort, which works actively to abandon the wrong version and cultivate the right one; and right mindfulness, which keeps that effort continuously in view so it is not forgotten or dropped. This trio is described as running and circling around the development of every single path factor in turn, playing a role for the noble eightfold path closely analogous to the role heedfulness plays for the five faculties and appropriate attention plays for the seven factors for awakening — in effect, a fully worked-out version of what those two earlier principles only imply.

Stream-entry, once-returning, and non-returning are each marked by a fresh convergence of the same eight factors at increasingly refined levels. Full arahantship, however, requires two further qualities beyond the original eight: right knowledge, the recognition that whatever needed to be done in the practice has in fact been done, and right release, the unshakable freedom that this knowledge confirms and that remains unshaken even in the very presence of that knowing. A related passage traces the whole path, factor by factor, back to a single root on either side: in someone submerged in ignorance, wrong view arises first, and each subsequent wrong factor arises dependent on the one before it, all the way down to wrong concentration; in someone instead grounded in clear knowing, the identical sequence runs in the opposite, skillful direction, culminating in right concentration and, beyond it, right knowledge and right release.

Letting Go of the Path Itself

Finally, the tradition is explicit that even the path is eventually set down once it has done its work. The well-known simile of the raft makes this point vividly: a traveler who binds together grass and branches into a raft to cross a dangerous stretch of open water would be foolish to keep hauling that raft along on dry land afterward, out of misplaced gratitude for how useful it had been. In the same way, the teaching — and the path itself — exists to be used for crossing over, not to be clung to once the crossing is already complete; letting go of the path at that point is not a relapse into wrong view but simply the natural end of needing a means once the end has been reached. The accompanying explanation of the simile identifies the great flood to be crossed as the combined pull of sensuality, the desire for further existence, attachment to views, and ignorance; the near, risky shore as identification with a fixed sense of self; the far, secure shore as unbinding itself; the raft as the noble eightfold path; and the traveler's own swimming effort, using hands and feet, as the exertion of persistence that carries a person across.

Key Passages

- SN 45:1 traces two parallel causal chains: in someone steeped in ignorance, wrong view leads in sequence to wrong resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and finally wrong concentration; in someone instead grounded in clear knowing, right view leads through the identical sequence to the eight right factors.

- SN 45:8 offers formal definitions of all eight path factors, including a description of right concentration as progression through the four jhānas and of right view as direct knowledge of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the way of practice leading to that cessation.

- AN 10:99 and AN 10:176 spell out the practical content of right speech and right action for monastics and for lay disciples respectively, including honesty when called as a witness in a public or legal proceeding and fidelity within relationships already committed to others.

- MN 44 has Sister Dhammadinnā explain to the layman Visākha that the noble eightfold path is itself a fabricated, conditioned thing, and that the three aggregates of virtue, concentration, and discernment are not contained within the eightfold path but rather that the path is distributed across the three aggregates, not the other way around.

- MN 117 gives an extended analysis of "noble right concentration with its supports," defining both the mundane and the noble or transcendent versions of right view, resolve, speech, action, and livelihood, and showing how right view, right effort, and right mindfulness together support the development of each remaining factor; it concludes that a trainee possesses eight such factors, while an arahant possesses ten, adding right knowledge and right release.

- SN 55:5 identifies the noble eightfold path itself as "the stream," and defines a stream-enterer simply as a person endowed with that path.

- SN 45:27 compares a mind without the support of the path to a pot without a stand, easily tipped over, and a mind grounded firmly in the path to a pot resting on a stand, difficult to upset.

- SN 45:154 compares a well-aimed spike of wheat or barley, capable of piercing a hand or foot pressed against it, to a well-aimed view: developing each factor of the path dependent on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, and aimed throughout at letting go, is what allows the path to cut cleanly through ignorance and give rise to clear knowing.

- SN 45:155 notes that developing the noble eightfold path automatically brings every earlier set — the frames of reference, the right exertions, the bases of power, the faculties, the strengths, and the factors for awakening — to full maturity as well, likened to the many different winds, from every direction, that all blow equally through open air.

- MN 149 describes how the full development of the path leads a practitioner to comprehend the five aggregates subject to clinging, abandon ignorance and craving for further existence, develop tranquility and insight together, and realize clear knowing and release, explicitly stating that tranquility and insight operate in tandem at this advanced stage rather than as separate practices.

- SN 45:159 compares the way developing the path brings about direct comprehension, abandoning, development, and realization to a guest house that receives travelers arriving from every direction without distinction.

- MN 22, paralleled at SN 35:197, presents the well-known simile of the raft: a raft built from gathered grass and branches to cross a dangerous stretch of water should be left behind once the crossing is complete, not carried onward on dry land out of misplaced attachment to something that has already served its purpose. The accompanying explanation identifies the great flood as the combined pull of sensuality, the desire for further becoming, attachment to views, and ignorance; the near, risky shore as identification with a fixed self; the far shore as unbinding; the raft itself as the noble eightfold path; and the traveler's own effort of hands and feet as the exertion of persistence that carries the crossing through.

Linear and Holographic Patterns Combined

A closing observation ties all seven sets of the wings to awakening together. Every set, on inspection, turns out to combine a linear, causal-loop pattern with a holographic one, even when one pattern is more prominent in how the set is usually described. The three sets treated earlier in the larger work — the frames of reference, the right exertions, and the bases of power — are presented mainly as holographic, yet each also contains an implicit linear sequence, since all three unfold across the same three stages of frames-of-reference practice described above under appropriate attention. Conversely, the sets treated in this guide — the faculties and strengths, the factors for awakening, and the eightfold path — are presented mainly as linear causal loops, yet each also turns out to have an implicit holographic formula built into it: heedfulness for the faculties and strengths, appropriate attention for the factors for awakening, and the recurring trio of right view, right effort, and right mindfulness for the eightfold path.

This combination of patterns is not merely a formal curiosity; it reflects something practical about how skill actually develops. The holographic aspect reflects the fact that all the qualities needed for awakening are already present in an untrained mind and are already interacting with one another; what is needed is simply to locate them and coax them into working together. The linear aspect reflects the fact that this coordination cannot happen all at once — particular qualities have to be emphasized at particular points, and different qualities need to take turns supporting one another as practice matures. The source compares this to how a child who cannot yet walk already has every muscle required for walking, but must still locate those muscles and learn, through repeated practice, to let the two legs support and assist each other until walking becomes natural and graceful rather than effortful and deliberate.

Cross-References Among the Four Sets

Reading the four sets side by side brings out a pattern that is easy to miss when each is studied in isolation. All four name substantially the same underlying qualities — trust, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment appear, in one guise or another, in every single set — yet each set arranges these qualities around a different animating principle and a different causal emphasis, so that the four together function less like four separate lists and more like four different cross-sections through one continuous process.

The five faculties emphasize governance: each of the five qualities must come to dominate the mind, with heedfulness as the single quality whose presence brings all five to full maturity together. The five strengths describe the identical five qualities from the opposite angle, emphasizing their capacity to withstand and overturn the specific unskillful tendencies — doubt, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction, and delusion — that would otherwise derail practice; the river-and-island simile makes clear that faculties and strengths are not two different achievements but two ways of describing one achievement.

The seven factors for awakening shift the emphasis toward how mindfulness and discernment, working together through the analysis of qualities, give rise to concentration, with appropriate attention as the animating principle — itself described as growing out of the conviction implicit in the faculties and maturing into the right view that anchors the eightfold path. The noble eightfold path, finally, is the most comprehensive formulation of all: it distributes the same underlying qualities across three aggregates (discernment, virtue, and concentration), describes both a mundane, developmental stage and a fully mature, transcendent stage for every one of its eight factors, and assigns right view, right effort, and right mindfulness a supporting role for every other factor that closely parallels the roles heedfulness and appropriate attention play in the two sets discussed before it.

Each set, in other words, can be read as an elaboration of the two before it: the strengths restate the faculties from a different vantage point; the factors for awakening take the mindfulness-and-concentration relationship emphasized by the faculties and reorganize it around discernment instead; and the eightfold path draws every earlier set into a single, most fully worked-out structure, one whose noble level is said to bring all the earlier sets to the culmination of their own development as well. Studied together rather than in isolation, the four sets read less like a redundant list and more like four progressively more detailed maps of a single, continuous path.

One further point of contact deserves mention: the transition each set makes from a mundane or preliminary level to a noble or transcendent one is described consistently, across all four sets, using the same short formula — that the quality in question should be developed "dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in letting go." This formula appears attached to the strengths, to each of the seven factors for awakening, and to each factor of the noble eightfold path in turn, and its recurrence is itself a kind of signature marking exactly where, in each set, the discussion shifts from an account of ordinary, effortful cultivation to an account of the transcendent breakthrough that cultivation is ultimately aimed at. A reader tracking this formula across the four sets has, in effect, a second index into the material, independent of the specific quality-names each set uses, pointing to the single hinge-point that all four sets share.

Study Questions

The following questions are offered as a way of testing whether the overview above has actually been absorbed, and as prompts for reflecting on how each set shows up in one's own practice, rather than as a comprehensive exam.

On the Five Faculties

- What are the three strands bound together in the faculty of conviction, and why does the source argue that they cannot really be separated from one another?
- In what sense does conviction, properly understood, place the responsibility for liberation on the practitioner rather than on an outside power?
- How does the musical-tuning simile associated with Venerable Soṇa illustrate the idea of balance in persistence?
- What does it mean, according to the texts on this set, to discern an "escape" even from concentration and discernment themselves?
- How does the fortress simile (AN 7:63) map each of the five faculties, plus the four jhānas, onto specific features of a frontier defense?

On the Five Strengths

- In what way do the five strengths differ in emphasis from the five faculties, given that both sets name the same five underlying qualities?
- What point does the river-and-island simile in SN 48:4 make about the relationship between the faculties and the strengths?

On the Seven Factors for Awakening

- How does the spiral pattern of the seven factors for awakening differ from the holographic pattern also attributed to the same set?
- What is the difference between the causal emphasis of the five faculties and that of the seven factors for awakening?
- Using the balance metaphor, which factors should be emphasized when the mind is sluggish, and which when it is restless? Why is mindfulness treated as an exception to this rule?
- What is the difference between the first stage of appropriate attention (noticing hindrances and awakening factors using "me" and "mine") and the third stage (questioning that very sense of ownership)?

- Why does the source suggest that the question "does the self exist?" is one that should be set aside rather than answered, while the question "is this mine?" is treated as genuinely useful?

On the Noble Eightfold Path

- What is the difference between the mundane and the noble (transcendent) levels of right view, and how does the mundane level prepare the way for the noble level?

- What three qualities does the source describe as "running and circling around" the development of every single path factor, and what role does each play?

- What two additional qualities does an arahant possess beyond the eight path factors held by a trainee, and how are they related to each other?

- In the raft simile, what does each element of the simile — the flood, the near shore, the far shore, the raft, and the swimmer's effort — represent?

- In what sense can a person let go of the path itself without this amounting to a relapse into wrong view?

- How do the two levels of meaning in the phrase "dependent on seclusion, dispassion, cessation, resulting in letting go" — one mundane, one transcendent — help explain why the same formula can describe both ordinary jhāna practice and full awakening?

- Choose any two of the four sets covered in this guide and describe, in your own words, one respect in which they overlap and one respect in which their emphasis differs.

Glossary of Key Pali Terms

Pali terms are given here in a simplified, unmarked spelling for ease of reading. Definitions reflect how each term is used specifically within the four sets covered in this guide.

- Indriya — "faculty"; a mental quality that comes to dominate or govern the mind. Shares its root with Indra, chief of the Vedic gods.

- Bala — "strength"; the same five qualities named as faculties, described instead in terms of their capacity to resist opposing, unskillful tendencies.

- Saddhā — "conviction" or "faith"; trust in the Buddha's awakening that combines belief in his teaching with a willingness to act on it.

- Viriya — "persistence" or "effort"; sustained energy directed at abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones.

- Sati — "mindfulness"; steady, non-forgetful attention, most fully described through the four frames of reference.

- Samādhi — "concentration"; unification of the mind, culminating in the four levels of jhāna.

- Paññā — "discernment" or "wisdom"; insight into the arising and passing of phenomena, culminating in direct knowledge of the four noble truths.

- Appamāda — "heedfulness"; a combination of restraint, sustained mindfulness, and effort, treated as the single quality that brings the five faculties and strengths to full maturity.

- Bojjhaṅga — "factor for awakening"; one of seven qualities (mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, equanimity) that build on and support one another during meditation.

- Dhamma-vicaya — "analysis of qualities"; the second factor for awakening, an active investigation that distinguishes skillful from unskillful mental states.

- Pīti — "rapture"; a factor for awakening arising from aroused persistence, distinguished from the calmer pleasure of serenity.

- Passaddhi — "serenity" or "tranquility"; the calming of body and mind that follows rapture and precedes concentration.

- Upekkhā — "equanimity"; an evenhanded balance of mind toward whatever arises, distinct from a flat or neutral feeling.

- Yoniso manasikāra — "appropriate attention"; the skill of directing inquiry toward questions that weaken mental effluents rather than multiply them; the animating principle behind the seven factors for awakening.

- Jhāna — a level of meditative absorption; the four jhānas together constitute the concentration faculty and the concentration aggregate of the path.

- Nibbāna (Unbinding) — the goal of the path; release from the round of repeated birth and death, described in this material as the "far shore" reached by the raft of the eightfold path.

- Āsava — "effluent"; a deep-seated defilement (sensuality, becoming, views, or ignorance) whose ending marks arahantship.

- Bojjhaṅga vs. indriya — worth distinguishing directly: the faculties emphasize how mindfulness and concentration give rise to discernment, while the factors for awakening emphasize how mindfulness and discernment give rise to concentration; the two sets describe the same causal territory from opposite directions.

- Magga — "path"; specifically the noble eightfold path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga), understood as a means to unbinding rather than as the goal itself.

- Sammā-diṭṭhi — "right view"; belief in the principle of kamma on the mundane level, and direct insight into the four noble truths on the noble or transcendent level.

- Aññā — "right knowledge" or "gnosis"; the arahant's recognition that the task of the path has been completed, paired with right release as the two qualities added to the eightfold path at full awakening.

- Vimutti — "release"; freedom from the effluents; when qualified as "right release" it names the tenth quality possessed by an arahant.

Appendix A: The Seven Sets at a Glance

The larger work of which this guide is an abridgment organizes the entire path into seven sets, traditionally said to total thirty-seven qualities in all. The four sets treated in detail above are the last four on the list; the first three, covered earlier in the source and referred to here only in passing, are summarized briefly below for context.

- The four frames of reference (satipaṭṭhāna) — mindfulness applied in turn to the body, to feelings, to the mind, and to mental qualities, observed "in and of themselves," without being drawn into the surrounding narrative of self and other. This set supplies the content of the mindfulness faculty and the mindfulness factor for awakening alike.

- The four right exertions (sammappadhāna) — effort directed at four tasks: preventing unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen, abandoning those that have, developing skillful qualities not yet arisen, and maintaining those already present. This set supplies the content of the persistence faculty.

- The four bases of power (iddhipāda) — desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination, each cultivated to the point of concentration, providing the basis for the various forms of mastery, including psychic power, that an advanced meditator may (but need not) develop.

- The five faculties (indriya) — conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, treated in full above, forming a causal loop under the governance of heedfulness.

- The five strengths (bala) — the same five qualities as the faculties, described instead in terms of their capacity to resist opposing unskillful tendencies.

- The seven factors for awakening (bojjhaṅga) — mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity, treated in full above, forming a causal loop under the governance of appropriate attention.

- The noble eightfold path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga) — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, treated in full above, the most comprehensive of the seven sets and the one whose noble level is said to bring every earlier set to full maturity as well.

Seen against this fuller list, the logic of the four sets covered in this guide becomes a little clearer: the frames of reference, right exertions, and bases of power supply raw material — mindfulness, effort, and the conditions for concentration — that the faculties, strengths, factors for awakening, and eightfold path then organize into increasingly complete causal structures, each adding conviction, or discernment, or both, until the eightfold path finally accounts for every quality on the full list of thirty-seven within a single, unified formulation.

Suggested Order of Study

Readers new to this material may find it easier to work through the four sets in an order that builds understanding gradually rather than strictly following the sequence in which they appear in the source text.

- Begin with the five faculties, since this set introduces conviction, the one quality not explicitly named in the sets covered earlier in the larger work, and lays out the basic causal loop that the remaining three sets all elaborate in one way or another.

- Move next to the five strengths, which can be studied quickly once the faculties are understood, since the two sets name identical qualities and differ only in emphasis.

- Take up the seven factors for awakening third, paying particular attention to the three stages of appropriate attention, since this material also supplies useful vocabulary (the balance metaphor, the feeding-and-starving metaphor) for understanding how the faculties and strengths are meant to be applied moment to moment in actual meditation.

- Finish with the noble eightfold path, which draws together the mundane and noble levels already introduced piecemeal in the earlier three sets into its own single, most complete formulation, and which alone among the four sets explicitly addresses what happens to practice once the goal has actually been reached.

- After finishing all four sets, revisit the "Cross-References" section, which is likely to make considerably more sense once the individual sets are no longer unfamiliar.

Appendix B: Frequently Confused Terms

A handful of terms recur across all four sets in ways that can blur together on a first reading. This short appendix pulls them apart.

Faculty vs. Strength vs. Factor for Awakening

Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment appear as both faculties and strengths — the same five qualities, described first as governing the mind and then as resisting what would overturn it. Persistence, mindfulness, and concentration also appear among the seven factors for awakening, but there they are joined by three qualities that do not appear in the faculties or strengths at all: analysis of qualities, rapture, and serenity. Analysis of qualities is closely related to discernment but is not identical with it — it names the specific, active investigation that distinguishes skillful from unskillful states in the moment, rather than the fuller insight into the four noble truths that discernment names. Rapture and serenity, meanwhile, describe stages on the way into concentration rather than concentration itself, which is why they appear as separate factors for awakening even though they do not appear as separate faculties or strengths.

Mundane vs. Noble (Transcendent)

Every factor of the noble eightfold path has both a mundane version, cultivated deliberately and still bound up with the effluents, and a noble or transcendent version, which arises together with insight into the four noble truths and is by definition free of effluents. The five faculties and seven factors for awakening are not usually described using this same mundane-versus-noble vocabulary, but the underlying distinction still applies to them: an ordinary meditator's mindfulness or concentration is not automatically the same as the mindfulness or concentration of someone who has broken through to stream-entry, even though both may be called by the same name.

Persistence vs. Right Effort vs. Right Exertion

These three terms name the same underlying quality at different points in the larger framework. The four right exertions, treated in an earlier part of the source, define effort in terms of four specific tasks (preventing, abandoning, developing, and maintaining). Right effort, the sixth factor of the noble eightfold path, is defined using the identical fourfold formula. Persistence, whether named as a faculty, a strength, or a factor for awakening, refers to this same effort considered simply as a quality of mind rather than as a formally numbered set of four tasks.

Note on This Abridgment

This guide compresses a substantially longer source — roughly fifty pages of commentary together with more than forty individual canonical passages — into a shorter overview organized to mirror the four subsections of Part II of the source text (E through H). Where the original text quotes suttas at length, this version instead summarizes their content and structure in paraphrase, so that readers can use it as a map of the territory before turning to the full canonical translations for the passages themselves. Sutta references, by collection and number (for example, SN 48:8, AN 7:63, MN 117, and Dhp 21), are preserved throughout so that any point made here can be traced back to its specific canonical source.

Because this is an abridgment rather than a reproduction, readers who want the precise wording of any given passage, or the full development of the commentary's argument, should consult the original text and the canonical translations it draws on directly.

Wings to Awakening — Part III: The Basic Factors

Abridged Edition

Table of Contents

- Editor's Preface
- Part III: The Basic Factors
  - A. Conviction
  - D. Concentration: Abandoning the Hindrances
  - E. Right Concentration
  - F. Concentration & Discernment
  - G. Equanimity in Concentration & Discernment
- Closing Synthesis
- Glossary of Selected Terms

Editor's Preface

This volume presents an abridged edition of Part III, "The Basic Factors," from a larger work organized around the Buddhist teaching of the five faculties — conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment — as a framework for understanding the thirty-seven qualities collectively known as the Wings to Awakening. Where the original work treats each of these factors in full, this abridgment retains five sections: conviction (III/A); the abandoning of the hindrances as a foundation for concentration (III/D); right concentration itself (III/E); the relationship between concentration and discernment (III/F); and the cultivation of equanimity within concentration and discernment (III/G).

Two sections of the original work — on persistence (III/B) and mindfulness (III/C) — are not included here, since the source material available for this abridgment did not extend to them; readers interested in the complete treatment of all five faculties are encouraged to consult the unabridged edition.

Each section below opens with a condensed version of the original explanatory essay, followed by a selection of the numbered canonical passages the essay draws upon, given here in abridged or paraphrased form with their traditional source citations (e.g., "AN 5:51" for Aṅguttara Nikāya, "SN 45:2" for Saṃyutta Nikāya, "MN 39" for Majjhima Nikāya, "DN 2" for Dīgha Nikāya, "Dhp" for Dhammapada, "Ud" for Udāna, "Iti" for Itivuttaka, and "Thig" for Therīgāthā). Passages marked "abridged" have been shortened or paraphrased from the fuller canonical text; a small number of very short passages are given essentially in full. Bracketed cross-references to other parts of

the original work (for example, "[§64]" or "[II/A]") have generally been retained where they help orient the reader, even though the sections they point to are not reproduced in this volume.

The aim throughout has been to preserve the shape of the original argument — how each faculty is defined, how it develops, and how it relates to the others — while reducing the overall length by roughly half. Readers who want the complete discourses in unabridged translation, together with the full apparatus of cross-references, should turn to the source edition.

Part III: The Basic Factors

A. Conviction

Of the five faculties, conviction covers the most ground, since it includes the whole context for practicing the Buddha's teachings — the attitudes and ethics of Buddhist life, whether lay or monastic. Conviction is defined as the four factors of stream-entry. Two lists describe these factors, and both are needed to understand conviction fully. The first gives the *prerequisites* for stream-entry: association with good people, listening to the true Dhamma, appropriate attention, and practice in line with the Dhamma. The second gives the *qualities that characterize* one who has already entered the stream: verified confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and virtues that appeal to the noble ones. Conviction is what leads toward stream-entry; stream-entry is the point at which conviction becomes unshakable. Only with Arahantship does knowledge become so complete that conviction is no longer needed at all.

Both lists cover three aspects of conviction — social (whom to trust), intellectual (what to believe), and practical (how to act as a result). These three aspects are inseparable, because conviction is not aimed at a merely descriptive proposition but at a course of action: the skillful mastery of the processes of kamma within a social context. The social aspect arises from the need to associate with people who have already mastered these processes, learning from their words and emulating their actions. The intellectual aspect — belief in the principle of kamma — is necessary because developing skillfulness in the mind requires understanding kamma's nature, taking responsibility for one's actions, and trusting one's own capacity to benefit from developing one's skills. The practical aspect is necessary because, if one doesn't follow through, this shows that one's professed conviction was not genuine and that one is not fully benefiting from one's own beliefs. Association with good people and appropriate attention are cited elsewhere as the primary external and internal prerequisites for developing anything skillful at all; meanwhile, the intellectual and practical aspects of conviction counteract the grosser roots of unskillfulness — belief in kamma undercuts delusion, and the practice of virtue weakens the force of greed and aversion.

The social aspect. Because "having admirable people as friends is the whole of the holy life" (§115), the texts address two major questions: how to recognize good people, and why one should associate with them. Passage §119 lists three basic teachings of good people — regard for generosity, for the renunciate life, and for service to one's parents. If one meets people who criticize these three practices, one would do well to avoid taking them as models, since their wisdom and motives cannot be trusted; the social and intellectual aspects of conviction interact here, since a person's teachings both reveal whether to associate with them and reveal what is actually good. Passage §117 extends this with the positive qualities to look for: conviction in kamma, generosity, virtue, and discernment. The crucial point is that good people are ultimately known by what they habitually *do*, not simply by what they say — and such habits can only be known through long association. This is precisely why, in Buddhist monastic life, a student never takes a lifetime vow of obedience to a teacher; if a student comes to see that a teacher does not genuinely embody these qualities, the student remains free to seek instruction elsewhere. Once a person attains stream-entry, recognizing good people becomes easier, since he or she can now recognize in others the same qualities of attainment already tasted directly.

Why should one bother associating with good people rather than relying entirely on oneself? Because the roots of skillfulness and unskillfulness lie mixed together in the mind, and the presence of unskillful roots makes them

genuinely hard to tell apart unassisted. One needs the advice and example of people further along the path to help identify one's own skillful qualities and to provide encouragement in developing them. Even someone not yet committed to practice does well to associate with virtuous people, since such people — embodying conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment — are unlikely to act unfairly or harmfully, and their wisdom is worth acquiring. This sharing of wisdom sets a causal chain in motion (detailed in §125 and §126) that leads, step by step, all the way to Awakening. The wide availability of books on Buddhism can obscure a basic fact: the Buddha's teachings are not simply propositions but qualities of heart and mind — skillful mastery of thought, word, and deed — best learned not from books but from people who have actually mastered them, much as many of the finer points of a sport can only be picked up by training alongside people who have already mastered it. AN 7:64 lists similar qualities that characterize a good person, many of which resist simple verbal formulation: knowledge of the Dhamma and of the meaning of statements can be passed on in words, but a sense of one's own strengths and weaknesses, of moderation, of proper timing, of social nuance, and of how to judge people are subtler and can only be absorbed by watching good people in action.

The intellectual aspect. With this we move to the verbal content that can be absorbed from good people, beginning with what §106 calls mundane right view: that there is merit in generosity; that good and bad are real moral qualities inherent in the universe rather than social convention; that there is a next life; that one has a genuine moral debt to one's parents; and that there exist people who have gained direct knowledge of these truths through right practice. Accepting these points on faith is the essential first step from mere acquaintance with the teachings to full commitment; doubting them saps the energy needed to develop skillful qualities and makes it more likely one will revert to short-term self-gratification. These beliefs underlie the three teachings of good people already mentioned — generosity, going forth, and service to parents — and prepare the ground for comprehending the higher teaching of the four noble truths. As the first list of stream-entry factors makes clear, listening to the Dhamma alone is not enough; one must also cultivate appropriate attention, learning first how to ask productive questions of a teacher, and then how to apply the categories of the four noble truths to one's own experience generally. This covers the first two levels of discernment — understanding based on listening and on reasoning — and begins the third, understanding based on the actual development of skillful mental qualities. Though listening is a prerequisite for appropriate attention, the latter does not follow automatically; it must be deliberately cultivated, as the Dhammapada's famous image makes vivid: even a lifetime spent with the wise teaches a fool nothing of the Dhamma, no more than a ladle tastes the soup it stirs, while a perceptive person grasps the Dhamma in a single moment, as the tongue instantly tastes what it touches. The purpose of meditation is precisely to develop the perceptiveness that allows the Dhamma to be genuinely understood rather than merely repeated.

With stream-entry, intellectual conviction becomes what the texts call verified conviction in the Buddha's Awakening, which branches into verified conviction in the Triple Gem — the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. One's own taste of the Deathless verifies both the Buddha's Awakening and that of the noble Sangha; understanding how one's own Awakening came about through practice verifies that the noble eightfold path lacks nothing and contains nothing superfluous. This produces the standard formula of confidence: the Buddha is rightly self-awakened, the Dhamma well taught, and the noble Sangha worthy of honor. In practical terms this means one is now convinced beyond doubt that human beings really can develop skillfulness all the way to the Deathless, and that the Deathless is the highest excellence available. Several passages note that stream-entry reinforces the conviction that the true Dhamma is fully expressed only in the Buddha's teaching — a claim that can surprise people familiar with Buddhism's long history of tolerance, who sometimes assume the appropriately "enlightened" stance is to endorse every path as equally valid. But tolerance and endorsement are not the same thing. From a streamwinner's perspective, endorsing another path as equally effective would concede that the noble eightfold path either lacks something essential or contains something superfluous — and the Buddha explicitly rejected other paths to the same goal as, by definition, containing wrong view, wrong resolve, and so on, comparing the attempt to derive Awakening from them to squeezing oil from gravel. He did not deny that other teachings, emphasizing virtue and concentration, can lead to great peace or rebirth in high heavens — only that mistaking those attainments for Unbinding is itself a form of wrong view that places full release out of reach.

This firmness need not produce intolerance, however. Buddhism's basic premise — the principle of kamma — places happiness and suffering squarely within the results of one's own past and present actions, and the noble eightfold path grows directly out of this principle as the most effective way of escaping kammic retribution. Other

paths are either incomplete versions of the eightfold path or rest on entirely different premises — for instance, the idea that some external being can bypass the law of kamma on one's behalf, or that ritual words or actions can shortcut the need for developed skill. People invested in such beliefs may feel threatened by outsiders who implicitly deny the shortcut they are counting on, which explains a certain historical pattern of intolerance among some such groups. But because the principle of kamma is fundamentally a teaching of personal responsibility, no one who genuinely understands kamma feels threatened by people who teach shortcuts around it. Before stream-entry, conviction can still waver — the path is long, and results come slowly — which is why practitioners are encouraged to avoid close association with anyone who rejects kamma outright. But those who have tasted the Deathless directly can no longer be persuaded to doubt the principle, since they have seen for themselves that the Deathless can only be reached through genuine skill in mindfulness and discernment applied to one's own mind. Their attitude toward other views resembles that of a skilled artisan toward less skilled workers: willing to teach those who are willing to learn, but not threatened by those who are not.

The practical aspect. Attaining this level of unshakable conviction requires putting the Dhamma into actual practice — showing the intimate connection between the intellectual and practical aspects of conviction. One needs some intellectual grasp of the doctrine before one can practice it, and one must practice to the point of directly touching Deathlessness before conviction in the doctrine becomes fully unshakable. The commentaries capture this by applying the single word "Dhamma" to all three levels — doctrine, practice, and attainment — corresponding to an object of awareness, a means of releasing awareness from its objects, and the awareness thereby released. Prior to stream-entry, the practical aspect of conviction is covered by "practicing in accordance with the Dhamma" — putting the Dhamma ahead of one's own preferences rather than practicing merely in line with personal likes and dislikes, which is the true test of conviction. It is all too easy to pick and choose among the teachings by other standards — in the West it is common to weigh the Dhamma against psychology or other social sciences and select accordingly — but the real question, the one Prince Siddhattha himself confronted, is whether one's time is better spent pursuing things subject to change and death, or pursuing the Deathless. Though there is long-standing recognition that people benefit even from following only part of the teaching, full results require full commitment, much as a medical regimen benefits even the occasional follower but only a fully cure requires consistent adherence — ordering one's priorities and taking the example of those who have mastered the skill of release as one's primary guide.

With stream-entry, conviction in kamma becomes firm enough that a streamwinner would never intentionally break any of the basic precepts of right speech, action, or livelihood — the quality called "virtues appealing to the noble ones." Concentration and discernment have also begun to develop by this point, though not yet fully matured; conviction cannot become fully firm until all five faculties have developed to at least some extent, after which conviction functions in turn to strengthen the remaining faculties further. The streamwinner realizes that his or her attainment came about through genuine mastery of the processes of kamma, but also that this mastery remains incomplete — a realization that supplies the ongoing motivation to continue developing all five faculties until they culminate in the full realization of the Deathless.

Selected Passages

§115 (SN 45:2). Ven. Ānanda remarked to the Buddha that admirable friendship, companionship, and camaraderie is half of the holy life. "Don't say that, Ānanda," the Buddha replied. "Admirable friendship… is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and comrades, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path." Through his own role as an admirable friend, beings subject to birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair have gained release from these things.

§116 (SN 55:23), abridged. Mahānāma tells the Buddha that were a doctrinal disagreement ever to arise between the Buddha and the entire Community of monks and nuns, lay followers, and even the world of devas and brahmās, he would side with the Buddha; he asks the Buddha to remember this as his confidence. Asked what he thinks of Mahānāma speaking this way, his companion Godha replies that he has nothing to say except that Mahānāma is "admirable and skillful."

§117 (AN 8:54). Advice to the layman Byagghapajja on admirable friendship: spending time with virtuous householders of any age, talking and engaging with them, and emulating their consummate conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment.

§118 (AN 3:133). "A friend endowed with these three qualities is worth associating with. Which three? He gives what is hard to give, does what is hard to do, endures what is hard to endure."

§119 (AN 3:45). "These three things have been promulgated by wise people, by people of integrity: generosity, going-forth [from the home life], and service to one's mother and father."

§120 (AN 7:6), abridged. The "treasure of generosity" is the state of a noble disciple whose awareness is cleansed of the stain of stinginess — freely generous, openhanded, and delighted by giving and sharing.

§121 (Iti 26), abridged. If beings knew the results of giving as the Buddha knows them, they would not eat without first sharing, even down to their very last mouthful, if someone were present to receive their gift. Because they do not know this, the stain of miserliness overcomes their minds.

§122 (Iti 107), abridged. Monastics and lay householders depend on one another: householders provide requisites — food, robes, lodging, medicine — while monastics teach the Dhamma. In this mutual dependence, both reach the true Dhamma, the unsurpassed safety from bondage; householders gain conviction in Arahants absorbed in jhāna, while enjoying, in due course, both worldly and heavenly happiness.

§123 (AN 2:31–32), abridged. A person of integrity is grateful and thankful; one without integrity is not. Two people are nearly impossible to fully repay — one's mother and father — even were one to carry them on each shoulder for a hundred years, feeding and bathing them the whole while. But whoever helps establish unbelieving parents in conviction, unvirtuous parents in virtue, stingy parents in generosity, and foolish parents in discernment does, to that extent, truly repay them.

§124 (Iti 106), abridged. Families in which children revere their parents are said to "live with Brahmā," with the earliest devas, with the earliest teachers, and with those worthy of gifts — because parents do so much for their children, caring for and nourishing them and introducing them to the world.

§125 (AN 10:61), abridged. A chain of nutriment conditions ignorance back to its root: not associating with people of integrity feeds not hearing the true Dhamma, which feeds lack of conviction, inappropriate attention, lack of mindfulness, lack of sense-restraint, misconduct, and the five hindrances, culminating in ignorance itself — much as rain filling mountain gullies eventually fills the great ocean. The reverse chain runs from associating with people of integrity, through hearing the Dhamma, conviction, appropriate attention, mindfulness, sense-restraint, right conduct, and the four frames of reference, up through the seven factors of Awakening and finally to clear knowing and release.

§126 (AN 8:2 + AN 7:6), abridged. Eight causes support the growth of discernism basic to the holy life: dwelling in dependence on a worthy teacher, developing shame and compunction toward misconduct; periodically approaching the teacher with questions; accomplishing twofold seclusion of body and mind after hearing the Dhamma; living a virtuous, restrained life; being erudite in the teachings; keeping persistence aroused for abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful; avoiding idle talk within the community; and remaining focused on the arising and passing of the five clinging-aggregates.

§127 (Dhp 76). "Regard him as one who points out treasure, the wise man who, seeing your faults, rebukes you. Stay with this sort of sage. For the one who stays with a sage of this sort, things get better, not worse."

§128 (AN 5:38), abridged. Five rewards come to a lay person of conviction: people of integrity show them compassion first, visit them first, accept gifts from them first, teach them the Dhamma first, and at death they arise in a good destination. Such a person is compared to a great banyan tree that shelters birds from all directions — a haven for monks, nuns, and lay followers, offering shade to those who seek shade and fruit to those who seek fruit.

§129 (SN 37:34), abridged. A female disciple who grows in conviction, virtue, learning, generosity, and discernment "grasps hold of what is essential" and takes hold of the true essence within herself.

§130 (MN 70), abridged. For a disciple with conviction in the Teacher's message, the fitting attitude is: "The Blessed One is the Teacher, I am a disciple. He is the one who knows, not I." Such a disciple is willing to let flesh and blood dry up, leaving only skin, tendons, and bones, rather than relax persistence before what can be reached through manly effort is reached. Two fruits can then be expected: gnosis here and now, or non-return.

D. Concentration: Abandoning the Hindrances

Concentration practice begins with abandoning the five hindrances — sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. These function as intermediate forms of the three roots of unskillfulness: sensual desire is a form of greed, ill will a form of aversion, and the remaining three, forms of delusion. All five block concentration and weaken discernment, making it hard to see what is truly beneficial for oneself or others.

This creates a genuine double bind: one needs to see that the hindrances are harmful in order to abandon them, yet while under their influence, that very clarity is obscured. When gripped by sensual desire it's hard to see the unattractive side of the object of desire, or the drawbacks of the desire itself; gripped by anger, it's hard not to feel the anger is justified; gripped by drowsiness, it's hard not to feel that one simply needs sleep; gripped by worry, it's hard not to believe the worry is necessary. Though the hindrances can't be fully relinquished before the various stages of Awakening, they can be sufficiently lessened at a preliminary level for the mind to settle into jhāna. Passage §159 lists five methods for handling unskillful thoughts during meditation, and the examples throughout this section focus mainly on the first two: replacing unskillful thoughts with skillful ones, and contemplating a hindrance's drawbacks until repulsion sets in. Examples of the first method include focusing on the unattractive side of a desired object, on the good qualities of someone toward whom ill will has arisen, on the folly of expecting everyone to act as one wishes, and simply changing one's object of meditation when drowsiness threatens. Examples of the second include recognizing that a hindrance places the mind in bondage and limitation, from which freedom can only be found by releasing its grip.

Escaping this double bind requires drawing on all five faculties together. Conviction is needed so one will actually listen to the advice of those who point out the hindrances' drawbacks. A certain momentum of persistence, functioning as right exertion, is needed to abandon a hindrance the moment one becomes aware of it, before it grows into something stronger. Mindfulness grounded in the frames of reference is needed to stay alert to the hindrances' arising and to remember why they should be abandoned in the first place — a mindfulness that can be strengthened both by recalling the teachings of others (the many similes in this section serve exactly this purpose) and by recalling the damage witnessed, in oneself or others, when a hindrance was given free rein. Because preliminary levels of concentration and discernment are already present in right exertion and the practice of the frames of reference, these faculties too contribute to abandoning the hindrances, growing more skilled at the task as they develop. The seven factors for Awakening act as direct antidotes to the hindrances, while discernment combined

with concentrated mindfulness enables what is perhaps the single most effective tool available: the ability to separate a hindrance, as a mental event, from its object.

For instance, discernment allows one to see the feeling of sensual desire as one thing and the object of that desire as something else entirely — crucial because confusing the two is exactly what makes the drawbacks of desire hard to perceive while it is present, and what hardens the mind generally against any teaching on the dangers of sensuality. There is a widespread impression that Buddhism denies the real beauty of sensory objects, but this isn't accurate: the Buddha acknowledged that sensory objects genuinely have their beauty and can bring real, if partial, satisfaction. His point was rather that beauty is not the whole story, since anything beautiful must eventually decay, and that any happiness built upon it is therefore set up for a fall. More importantly, the Buddha defined sensuality not as the objects of the senses themselves but as the passion and delight felt toward one's intentions regarding them; though sense objects are in themselves neither good nor evil, the act of passion and delight forms a genuine bond on the mind, disturbing its peace and prolonging entrapment in the cycle of rebirth. Only by separating the desire from its object can this teaching be directly verified for oneself. The same principle applies to the other hindrances: separating the object of one's anger from the anger itself as a passing mental event makes the drawbacks of allowing anger free rein far easier to see. This same capacity to separate act from object also lets a meditator notice a hindrance early, before it becomes overpowering, treating it simply as a mental quality to be observed coming and going — over time becoming so familiar with the underlying patterns that the hindrances can be undercut and eliminated from the mind for good.

Selected Passages

§131 (AN 5:51), abridged. The five hindrances are compared to watercourses diverted from a strong mountain river: with the diversions open, the current weakens and cannot carry everything before it, so that a monk overcome by the hindrances cannot know what is truly beneficial for himself or others. Closing the diversions restores the river's full force, just as a monk free of the hindrances gains the possibility of realizing noble knowledge and vision.

§132 (AN 5:23), abridged. Just as gold defiled by iron, copper, tin, lead, or silver isn't pliant or luminous and can't be worked into fine ornaments, so too a mind defiled by the five hindrances isn't pliant or rightly concentrated for ending the effluents. Once freed of these five defilements, the mind becomes pliant, luminous, and rightly concentrated, able to realize whatever quality one turns it toward.

§133 (SN 46:55), abridged. A set of similes for the hindrances, each imagining a bowl of water in which one cannot see one's own reflection: sensual passion is like water mixed with dye; ill will, like water boiling on a fire; sloth and drowsiness, like water covered with algae; restlessness and anxiety, like water ruffled by wind; and uncertainty, like water stirred up, muddied, and left in the dark. In each case, one overcome by the hindrance can neither know nor see what is truly for one's own benefit or the benefit of others.

§134 (MN 39), abridged. Five similes describe freedom from the hindrances: like repaying a debt, recovering from serious illness, being released from prison, gaining freedom from slavery, and emerging safely from a dangerous road through desolate country, each occasion bringing real joy and happiness. When the hindrances remain within him, a monk regards this as exactly this kind of burden; once abandoned, he feels the corresponding sense of freedom and security.

§135 (Ud 6:9), abridged. Watching insects meet their downfall in oil lamps at night, the Buddha exclaimed: "Rushing headlong, missing what's essential, bringing on one new bond after another, like insects falling into the flame, some are intent only on what's seen and heard."

§136 (Ud 7:3). "Clinging to sensuality, to sensual ties, seeing no blame in the fetter, never will those tied up in the fetter cross over the flood so great and wide."

§137 (AN 7:48), abridged. A discourse on bondage and lack of bondage: a woman who attends inwardly to her own feminine qualities and is delighted by them then attends outwardly to masculine qualities with the same delight, wanting to be bonded to what lies outside herself — this is bondage. The same pattern, mirrored, describes a man's bondage to femininity. Freedom from bondage consists in no longer attending with delight, inwardly or outwardly, to these qualities, and so no longer wanting the bond or the pleasure that depends on it.

§138 (MN 54), abridged. The Buddha offers a series of similes for sensuality, each followed by the same refrain. A starving dog gnawing a chain of bones — thoroughly scraped, without any flesh, merely smeared with blood — gets nothing from it but weariness and vexation. A vulture, kite, or hawk that seizes a lump of flesh and fails to drop it quickly when pursued by other birds meets death or death-like pain. A man carrying a burning grass torch against the wind, who fails to drop it quickly, burns his hand or arm. A man dragged toward a pit of glowing embers by two strong men twists his body desperately to avoid it, "loving life, hating death, loving pleasure, abhorring pain." A man who dreams of delightful parks and lakes finds nothing there on waking. A man who parades through the market in borrowed finery is stripped of it the moment its true owners appear, and cannot rightly complain. And a man who climbs a fruit tree to eat his fill, while another man below chops the tree down at the root to get at the same fruit, risks being crushed if he does not climb down quickly enough. In each case, the disciple of the noble ones reflects: "The Blessed One has compared sensuality to this, of much stress, much despair. The drawback there is greater." Seeing this with right discernment, he sets aside the equanimity that depends on multiplicity and develops instead the equanimity that depends on singleness, where all clinging to worldly baits ceases without trace.

§139 (MN 75), abridged. Using the image of a leper whose impaired senses cause him to feel a "pleasant" sensation from cauterizing his wounds over hot embers — a sensation that would be simply painful to anyone healthy — the Buddha explains that sensuality has always been "painful to the touch, hot, and scorching," but that beings not free from passion, their faculties similarly impaired by craving, mistake it for pleasant. The more such a person indulges, the more his wounds worsen even as he continues to feel a measure of satisfaction — just as no king or minister enjoying full sensual indulgence has ever been found dwelling with a mind free of thirst and truly at peace.

§140 (Dhp 147, 150), abridged. "Look at the beautified image, a heap of festering wounds… A city made of bones, plastered over with flesh and blood, whose hidden treasures are pride and deceit, aging and death."

§141 (Dhp 186–87), abridged. "Not even if it rained gold coins would we have our fill of sensual pleasures… Knowing this, the wise one finds no delight even in heavenly sensual pleasures. He is one who delights in the ending of craving."

§142 (Thig 14), abridged. As the nun Subhā walks through a delightful mango grove, a libertine blocks her path. She protests that it is not proper for him to touch "a woman gone forth," declaring herself pure and unblemished, her mind everywhere released. He presses his case at length, praising the beauty of the forest, her youth, and her eyes — likened to those of a fawn or a mountain nymph — and offers her a life of luxury, jewels, and fine fabrics if she will abandon the holy life. She answers that he might as well try to jump over Mount Sineru or catch the moon as a plaything, since nothing in the world any longer holds the least attraction for her passion, "killed, root and all, by the path." She compares human beings to puppets hitched up with sticks and strings, dancing until the strings are cut and thrown away — no different, she says, from her own body, which likewise "doesn't function" once devoid of the mental qualities that seem to animate it. Comparing his infatuation to being deceived by a mural painted on a wall or a mirage in the desert, and unmoved even as he continues to praise her eyes, she finally plucks one out with an unattached mind and offers it to him outright: "Here, take this eye. It's yours." His passion vanishes on the spot, and he begs her forgiveness, comparing what he had attempted to embracing a blazing fire or seizing a poisonous snake. Freed, she returns to the Buddha's presence, where her eye is restored exactly as it was before.

§143 (AN 5:161), abridged. Five ways of subduing hatred toward a particular person: developing good will for them; developing compassion for them; developing equanimity toward them; paying them no mind whatsoever; and

reflecting that they, like everyone, are the "owner" of their own kamma and will inherit its results regardless of what one does.

§144 (AN 5:162), abridged. Ven. Sāriputta describes how to subdue hatred toward five types of person by deliberately attending to whatever purity remains in them — their speech if their conduct is impure, their conduct if their speech is impure, their occasional moments of mental clarity if both are impure, simple compassion if neither purity nor clarity is present, and, for one who is genuinely pure and clear-minded throughout, simply resting one's attention there, "like a person plunging gratefully into a clear, cool pool."

§145 (AN 10:80), abridged. Ten ways of subduing hatred, largely built around the reflection "But what should I expect?" — applied to harm someone has done, is doing, or will do to oneself or to those dear to oneself, and to aid given to those not dear to oneself — concluding simply that "one doesn't get worked up over impossibilities."

§146 (Dhp 3–5), abridged. "'He insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me' — for those who brood on this, hostility isn't stilled… Hostilities aren't stilled through hostility, regardless. Hostilities are stilled through non-hostility: this, an unending truth."

§147 (AN 7:58), abridged. When Ven. Mahā Moggallāna was overcome by drowsiness in meditation, the Buddha gave him a graduated series of remedies: stop attending to the drowsy perception; recall and reflect on the Dhamma one has learned; recite it aloud; pull one's earlobes and rub one's limbs; rise, wash one's eyes, and look at the stars; attend to the perception of light; walk back and forth mindfully; and, as a last resort, lie down mindfully in the "lion's posture," resolved to rise the moment one wakes rather than lingering in the pleasure of drowsiness.

E. Right Concentration

Three questions organize this section: What is right concentration? How is it mastered? How is it used?

What it is. Concentration is defined as singleness of mind, but not every instance of mental unification counts as *right* concentration — the Buddha identified right concentration specifically with the four jhānas, and only when they are free of the hindrances. Absorption in sensual passion, however single-minded, is not part of the path; the very definition of the first jhāna specifies that it counts as a path factor only when the mind has become secluded from sensuality and unskillful qualities. The singleness of jhāna means both that awareness narrows to a single quality of its object and that awareness simultaneously expands to suffuse that object entirely — the repeated imagery of "permeating," "suffusing," "stretching," and "filling" in the similes for jhāna captures this dual sense of narrowing focus and expanding awareness, culminating in the fourth jhāna, where the whole body is filled with a bright sense of awareness. This same idea underlies the instruction, in breath meditation, to remain sensitive to the entire body while breathing — the technical term for the mind in jhāna literally means "enlarged" or "expanded."

The commentaries distinguish "form jhāna" from "formless jhāna," each with several levels, though the word "form" carries two different meanings across the texts. In one sense it denotes the physical body, and form jhāna in this sense is absorption in the felt sense of one's own body from within, developed through four progressive levels identical to those given in the standard definitions of the concentration faculty and of right concentration under the eightfold path. In another sense, "form" denotes visible light and imagery some meditators perceive in the mind's eye, analyzed elsewhere into either two or three levels, both patterns ending in a perception of "the beautiful" that functions equivalently to the radiant awareness of the fourth level of body-based jhāna. From either basis, the sense of equanimity that accompanies this radiance can support the four "formless" attainments — progressive absorption

in the perceptions of infinite space, infinite consciousness, "there is nothing," and finally neither perception nor non-perception.

How it is mastered. Attaining even the first jhāna depends on having abandoned the hindrances beforehand, since the sense of freedom that comes with their abandonment supplies the joy and pleasure that let the mind settle skillfully into the present moment. The Buddha's most detailed meditation instructions — the sixteen steps of mindfulness of in-and-out breathing — map directly onto the standard description of the four jhānas, though following this map skillfully requires some care. To begin with, subtler obstacles than the five hindrances can still interfere even after the hindrances have been set aside; lapses of mindfulness and alertness can let them creep back in. Passage §159 outlines five techniques for handling distracting thoughts, arranged from gentler to more forceful: substituting a wholesome theme for the unskillful one (as a small peg drives out a larger one); scrutinizing the thought's drawbacks until repulsion sets in (as one horrified to find a corpse hung around the neck); deliberately ignoring the thought (as one who simply looks away from an unwanted sight); attending to and relaxing the underlying mental tension that fuels the thought (as a walker gradually slows to a stop, then sits, then lies down, taking up ever more refined postures); and, as a genuine last resort, forcibly restraining the mind with clenched teeth and effort of will — useful when discernment isn't yet sharp enough for the gentler methods, though the gentler approaches remain more effective once discernment develops.

The stages of practice are listed in the order in which they can be *mastered*, not necessarily the order in which they will be *experienced* — a meditator might feel rapture before achieving full-body sensitivity to the breath, for example, and should be careful not to conclude from this that an earlier step has become unnecessary. It is also worth stressing that mastering every level of jhāna is not required for Awakening; the first jhāna, or even just the first four steps of breath meditation, can provide a sufficient basis for the discernment that leads to stream-entry, in which case practice can proceed directly from step four to step thirteen, skipping the intervening steps entirely — and, in fact, this same jump can be made from any step beyond the fourth. That said, the higher stages are not superfluous for meditators whose minds naturally settle into deeper stillness on their own, without any accompanying insight arising: the fuller maps help such a meditator recognize genuine progress in concentration without mistaking it for Awakening, and reviewing the distinct levels — moving deliberately from one to the next — can build real insight into the element of will and fabrication that constructs each of them, which is itself the route to eventual dispassion and Awakening.

The maps should not, however, be used to plan one's practice in advance, trying to concoct a particular level of jhāna based on ideas picked up secondhand. On reaching a given level, a meditator should not rush toward the next but should instead familiarize himself thoroughly with that level, allowing it to ripen naturally rather than jumping ahead to "taste different grass and water" elsewhere, when in time the new grass and water will simply develop within one's own pasture. It is also worth bearing in mind that the maps describe only the stages of *right* concentration and not the varieties of wrong concentration that can masquerade as progress — a blurred, half-waking state essentially amounting to a concentration of delusion, in which the object grows hazy and ill-defined, or a trance-like state of non-perception in which sensory experience blanks out entirely, essentially a concentration of subtle aversion. A meditator can remain in this latter state for long periods that nonetheless feel momentary, and can even determine in advance when to emerge, but tends to feel dazed afterward, a reaction caused by the aversive force that produced the state to begin with. As a general rule, right concentration is always a fully alert, mindful state; any stillness lacking clear mindfulness and alertness is wrong concentration, however peaceful it may feel.

The breath serves as the Canon's primary meditation object for two reasons: historically, it was the Buddha's own focus on the night of his Awakening; theoretically, a state of concentration built on the breath is the meeting place of all three types of "fabrication" described in dependent co-arising — bodily fabrication (the breath itself), verbal fabrication (directed thought and evaluation, present in the first jhāna), and mental fabrication (the feelings and perceptions present throughout all four jhānas, along with the basic mental label "breath" or "form" underlying the state of jhāna). Because transcendent discernment must ultimately engage all three types of fabrication directly in order to dispel the ignorance underlying them, breath-based jhāna is an especially efficient point at which to work with all three simultaneously.

The first two of the sixteen steps involve simple directed thought and evaluation — attending to the breath as it is in the present, and evaluating it as one begins to notice variations in its length; some modern teachers add that this evaluation can include gently adjusting the breath's rhythm for maximum comfort, since the first jhāna must be grounded in a genuine sense of pleasure. The remaining steps are progressively willed: training oneself to become sensitive to the body as a whole, then to the bodily sensations themselves, calming "bodily fabrication" — the breath — to produce an easeful rapture and pleasure that, as with the classic simile of the bathman kneading water through a ball of bath powder, comes to suffuse the entire body. With bodily fabrications stilled, mental fabrications — feeling and perception — become clearly apparent, much as a precisely tuned radio eliminates static and makes a broadcast clear; these too are calmed, corresponding to the still waters of the third jhāna in contrast to the welling spring of the second, leaving simply a sense of the mind itself, corresponding to the fourth jhāna, in which the body is filled from head to toe with bright, radiant awareness — completing the first level of frames-of-reference practice.

From here, steps nine through twelve consolidate this mastery by reviewing the various levels of jhāna with attention shifted from the breath itself to the way the mind relates to the breath — noticing, for instance, that the breath feels different at different levels of jhāna not because of any actual change in the breath but because of how the mind's own relationship to it has shifted, shedding successive layers of mental activity. This shift in focus also makes visible the subtler defilements that can still interfere with full mastery of concentration — the image, from a passage addressed to meditators experiencing visions, of holding a quail neither too loosely nor too tightly has become a standard reference point in Buddhist meditation manuals for exactly this kind of delicate balance. This same period of practice is also where the four formless jhānas can be discovered, growing directly out of how the mind relates to the still sense of the body in the fourth jhāna: first attending to the surrounding sense of space rather than the perceived form of the body, then shedding even the perception of space for a limitless sense of awareness, then shedding that oneness of awareness for a bare perception of inactivity, and finally shedding even that perception, leaving a state so refined that it can barely be called perception at all. One further attainment, the cessation of feeling and perception, lies beyond the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, but this state is qualitatively distinct: it cannot be reached without already having attained at least the level of non-returning, since the full cessation of all three types of fabrication requires that ignorance itself — their underlying condition — has already stopped.

How it is used. Four uses of concentration are named: a pleasant abiding in the present, the attainment of knowledge and vision (the basis for the first five supranormal powers), mindfulness and alertness (the frames of reference), and the ending of the mental effluents. Some meditators become wary of jhāna's pleasure, fearing attachment to it, but the Canon states plainly that there is nothing blameworthy in this pleasure — indeed, it was precisely the Buddha's own realization of this point that marked the turning point away from self-affliction and toward the middle way. This pleasure serves several real functions: it stabilizes the mind, giving insight the steady conditions it needs, much as scientific measurement requires steady instruments; it heightens sensitivity, since tuning the mind to jhāna's refined pleasure sharpens awareness of even subtle levels of stress; and, because it doesn't depend on the five senses, it loosens the mind's investment in ordinary sensory pleasure, acting as a fulcrum for prying loose the very attachments the practice aims to release — reflected in the fact that full mastery of jhāna is bound up with the attainment of non-returning, where sensual passion itself is abandoned. Finally, this pleasure offers rest and encouragement precisely when the mind's discernment grows dulled or needs coaxing into accepting harsh but necessary lessons — much as a rested, well-fed person accepts criticism more readily than a tired, hungry one.

The fifth factor of noble right concentration — a reflective "stepping back" from the object of absorption without disturbing the absorption itself, likened to a standing person reflecting on someone sitting down — is what allows insight to arise from within jhāna, corresponding to steps nine through twelve of breath meditation. One observes the mental events constructing the state of concentration and comes to see how inconstant, fabricated, and willed they really are, giving direct insight into how present intention shapes present experience, and into the general pattern of cause and effect in the mind. Recognizing this inconstancy as also stressful and not-self brings a sense of dispassion for any craving directed toward these events, along with direct experience of their fading and cessation, and finally relinquishment of attachment not just to the events themselves but even to the very discernment that saw through them — corresponding to steps thirteen through sixteen of breath meditation, and bringing the seven factors of Awakening to full completion. Even after release, an Arahant continues to practice concentration, no longer needing it to end the effluents but still valuing it for a pleasant abiding and for continued mindfulness and alertness — and,

as the accounts of the Buddha's own passing show, the practice of concentration remains useful all the way to the very point of total release from the round of death and rebirth.

Selected Passages

§148 (MN 44). Asked what concentration is, Sister Dhammadinnā answers Visākha: "Singleness of mind is concentration; the four frames of reference are its themes; the four right exertions are its requisites; and any cultivation, development, and pursuit of these qualities is its development."

§149 (AN 4:41), abridged. Four developments of concentration are described. The first, leading to pleasant abiding in the present, is the standard description of the four jhānas. The second, leading to knowledge and vision, is the practice of attending to the perception of light so that day and night become equivalent, developing a "brightened mind." The third, leading to mindfulness and alertness, is knowing feelings, perceptions, and thoughts as they arise, persist, and subside. The fourth, leading to the ending of the effluents, is remaining focused on the arising and passing away of the five clinging-aggregates.

§150 (AN 5:28), abridged. Five-factored noble right concentration is described through its classic similes. The first jhāna permeates the body with rapture and pleasure the way a skilled bathman kneads moisture through a ball of bath powder until it is thoroughly saturated yet does not drip. The second, born of concentration rather than seclusion, is like a lake fed entirely by an internal spring rather than any external inflow. The third, marked by pleasure without rapture, is like lotuses that flourish fully immersed in cool water from root to tip. The fourth, marked by pure equanimity, is like a person wrapped head to foot in white cloth, with no part of the body left uncovered. The fifth factor is the capacity to reflect on this state of concentration itself, well tuned and penetrated by discernment, "as a standing person might reflect on someone sitting down." A monk who develops all five factors, the passage concludes, can — like a brimful water jar tipped by a strong man, or a chariot ready at a crossroads with a skilled driver at the reins — realize whatever quality of knowledge he turns his mind toward, whenever the opportunity arises.

§151 (SN 54:1), abridged. The sixteen steps of mindfulness of in-and-out breathing: training oneself to know the breath as long or short; to breathe sensitive to the whole body; to calm bodily fabrication; to breathe sensitive first to rapture, then to pleasure, then to mental fabrication; to calm mental fabrication; to breathe sensitive to the mind itself; to gladden the mind, to steady it, and to release it; and finally, to breathe while focusing in turn on inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment.

§152 (MN 108), abridged. Asked whether the Buddha praised all forms of jhāna, Ven. Ānanda clarifies that he did not: he did not praise absorption in the five hindrances themselves, since a meditator absorbed in, say, sensual passion or uncertainty does not discern the escape from it. He did praise the four jhānas proper, secluded from sensuality and unskillful qualities — and it was this latter sort of jhāna, and only this sort, that the Buddha both taught and praised.

§153 (AN 5:113), abridged. A monk who cannot withstand the impact of sights, sounds, aromas, tastes, or tactile sensations is incapable of entering and remaining in right concentration; a monk who can withstand these impacts is capable of it.

§154 (AN 6:73–74), abridged. A monk who has not abandoned six qualities — sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, and not clearly seeing the drawbacks of sensual pleasure — cannot enter the first jhāna; nor can one who has not abandoned thoughts and perceptions of sensuality, ill will, and violence.

§155–156 (AN 6:72, AN 6:24), abridged. A monk skilled in attaining, maintaining, and exiting concentration — and doing so deliberately, persistently, and readily — is capable of mastering strength in concentration; a monk additionally skilled in the mind's preparedness for concentration, its range, and its application "could break through the Himalayas, king of mountains, to say nothing of miserable ignorance."

§157 (AN 10:99), abridged. Just as a large bull elephant can safely bathe in a deep pool while a rabbit or cat attempting the same plunge will either sink or be swept away, so too whoever claims, "Without having attained concentration, I will go live in solitude in the wilderness," can be expected to sink or be swept away in the same fashion.

§158 (AN 5:29). Five rewards of walking meditation: endurance for travel, endurance for exertion, freedom from disease, good digestion of food, and concentration that, once won through walking meditation, lasts for a long time.

§159 (MN 20), abridged. Five progressive remedies for unskillful thoughts arising in meditation: attend to a different, skillful theme (as one peg drives out another); scrutinize the thought's drawbacks until genuinely repulsed by it (as one horrified to find a corpse hung around the neck); deliberately pay it no mind (as one who simply looks away from an unwanted sight); attend to relaxing the underlying tension that fuels it (as a walker who gradually slows, then stops, then sits, then lies down, taking up ever more refined postures); and, as a last resort, forcibly restrain the mind with clenched teeth and effort of will. A monk who masters these five approaches gains complete mastery over the course of his own thinking, thinking only what he wishes to think.

§160 (AN 3:100), abridged. As a goldsmith washes away gross, moderate, then fine impurities from gold before the metal becomes workable, a meditator likewise removes gross impurities (misconduct of body, speech, and mind), then moderate ones (thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and violence), then fine ones (thoughts of caste, home district, and not wanting to be despised) — until only thoughts of the Dhamma remain, and eventually the mind settles naturally, no longer needing to be held in place by forceful restraint.

§161 (MN 128), abridged. Ven. Anuruddha reports to the Buddha that although he and his companions remain heedful, ardent, and resolute, their perception of inner light and visionary forms keeps unaccountably vanishing. The Buddha recounts his own pre-Awakening struggle with exactly this problem. Investigating the cause each time the light disappeared, he traced it in succession to uncertainty; then to inattention, sloth and drowsiness, fear, elation, and inertia; then to excessive persistence, which he compares to gripping a quail so tightly in both hands that it dies; then to sluggish persistence, compared to holding a quail so loosely that it flies away; and finally to longing, a perception of multiplicity, and excessive absorption in the visionary forms themselves. As he came to recognize each of these in turn as "a defilement of the mind," he abandoned it, until eventually he could perceive light and see forms steadily, for a whole day and night at a stretch, and could develop concentration deliberately in various modes — with and without directed thought and evaluation, with and without rapture, and accompanied by either enjoyment or equanimity. Through this systematic mastery, knowledge and vision finally arose in him: "Unprovoked is my release. This is my last birth. There is no further becoming."

§162 (AN 9:35), abridged. A wise mountain cow, familiar with rugged terrain, plants her front hoof firmly before lifting her hind hoof, and so travels safely to new pasture and back again; a foolish cow attempting the same journey carelessly "slips and falls from both sides." In the same way, a skilled meditator masters each level of jhāna fully — sticking with it, developing it, establishing himself firmly in it — before attempting the next, all the way through the four formless attainments and, ultimately, the cessation of perception and feeling, rather than jumping ahead. Mastered this way, his mind becomes pliant and workable, and with concentration well developed and limitless, he can realize whatever higher knowledge he turns his mind toward.

§163 (MN 137), abridged. Just as an elephant guided by its trainer can be made to go in any of the four cardinal directions, a person guided by the Tathāgata can be led through eight "directions": perceiving form while possessed

of form; perceiving external forms while not perceiving form internally; being intent solely on "the beautiful"; and the four formless attainments, culminating in the cessation of feeling and perception.

§164 (SN 14:11), abridged. Seven meditative "properties" are named — light, beauty, and the four formless dimensions, plus the cessation of feeling and perception — each discerned in dependence on its opposite or its immediate predecessor (light in dependence on darkness, beauty in dependence on the unattractive, and so on). The first five are to be reached as perception-attainments, the sixth as a "remnant of fabrications" attainment, and the seventh, uniquely, as a cessation-attainment.

F. Concentration & Discernment

Some sets in the texts list jhāna as a condition for discernment; others list discernment as a condition for jhāna. Read through the lens of this/that conditionality, both patterns convey the same underlying point: jhāna and discernment support one another mutually in practice. The apparent difference simply reflects differences among meditators — some develop strong concentration before strong discernment, others gain sound theoretical understanding before developing strong concentration — but in either case, both qualities are ultimately needed for Awakening, and when the practice reaches full maturity, concentration and discernment act in tandem.

Whether jhāna is strictly necessary for Awakening is one of the more contested questions in the Theravada tradition. Three basic positions have been advanced: that jhāna is unnecessary at any of the four levels of Awakening, since a class of "dry insight" meditators can become "discernment-released" on a level of concentration below jhāna; that jhāna is necessary only for non-returning and Arahantship, based on a passage stating that concentration is fully mastered only at the level of non-returning; and that at least the first jhāna is essential at every stage. The canonical evidence supports the third position. The eightfold factors of stream-entry themselves include right concentration, defined as jhāna, making jhāna central to the streamwinner's path; and no canonical passage describes the development of transcendent discernment without at least some skill in jhāna. The statement that concentration matures fully only at non-returning is best read as distinguishing mere *attainment* of jhāna, which a streamwinner may already have, from full *mastery* of it, which the further discernment gained in perfecting that mastery then carries forward to non-returning. Likewise, "discernment-released" denotes someone who reaches Arahantship without experiencing the four *formless* jhānas specifically — not someone who has bypassed jhāna altogether.

Much of this controversy traces to a difference in definition: the commentaries describe jhāna in terms quite different from the canonical description, built around a technique called *kasina*, in which a meditator stares at an external object until its image becomes imprinted in the mind, producing a "countersign" said to mark threshold concentration. Even the commentarial tradition admits that breath meditation doesn't fit this mold well — where other objects grow more vivid the more one focuses on them, the breath grows more subtle and harder to detect the more one focuses on it, leading the commentaries to claim (without canonical support) that only Buddhas and their close disciples find the breath a workable object for jhāna. Nothing in the Canon itself describes staring at an object to produce a countersign, and it seems unlikely the Buddha would have taught breath meditation so extensively to such a wide range of people if only a rare few could actually use it to reach jhāna. What the commentaries call jhāna, in short, appears to be something rather different from what the word means in the Canon — which is why the commentarial position that "jhāna" is unnecessary and the canonical position that jhāna is necessary can both be correct, simply describing two different things by the same name.

Once attained in the canonical sense, jhāna offers an ideal proving ground for discernment, because its stability gives discernment a firm basis for clear seeing, while its refined pleasure and equanimity reveal that even the most refined mundane states remain inconstant and stressful — exactly the kind of insight that leads on to dispassion. On any of the first seven levels of jhāna, a meditator can step back slightly from the object of absorption — entering the fifth, reflective factor of noble right concentration — to observe how the mind actually relates to that object, seeing

the process of causation and the acts of mental fabrication that keep the mind there. What matters is not that every meditator perceive every one of these acts in exhaustive detail — a level of resolution attributed specifically to Sāriputta, the Buddha's foremost disciple in discernment — but that a meditator develop genuine dispassion toward the state of jhāna itself, seeing that even its steady, refined pleasure and equanimity are artificial, willed, inconstant, and stressful, and therefore not worth identifying with. Jhāna thereby becomes an ideal test case for understanding kamma and dependent co-arising directly, in a controlled setting where its own stability and refinement make the underlying process unusually visible. The dispassion this produces can, when fully matured, lead through the fading and cessation of even the subtlest remaining mental activity — including the activity of discernment itself — to total relinquishment and the clear knowing and release of Arahantship.

In the reverse direction, discernment supports jhāna in two distinct ways. On the mundane level, it lets a meditator notice which factors of a given jhāna level have simply become unnecessary — as the wooden forms used to pour a concrete wall become unnecessary once the concrete has set — allowing the meditator to let those factors go and progress to the next level; a list of the factors successively dropped in this way, as concentration deepens, is given elsewhere in the texts. On the transcendent level, the discernment that actually brings about Awakening produces a supramundane form of jhāna called "the fruit of gnosis" — independent of all ordinary perception and intentional process, beyond the limits of cosmos, time, and the present moment: the Arahant's direct foretaste, within this very lifetime, of the total Unbinding that the awakened mind experiences fully and finally at death.

Selected Passages

§165 (AN 4:94), abridged. Four types of practitioner exist: one with tranquility of awareness but not insight through discernment; one with insight but not tranquility; one with neither; and one with both. Each of the first two incomplete types is advised to approach and question the other about how to develop the quality they lack, until eventually each attains both; the one lacking both should approach someone with both, asking how the mind is steadied and how fabrications are properly regarded. One who already has both should keep refining these same qualities further, toward the ending of the effluents.

§166 (AN 4:170), abridged. Ven. Ānanda reports that every declaration of Arahantship made in his presence has come by one of four paths: developing insight preceded by tranquility; developing tranquility preceded by insight; developing tranquility and insight together, "in concert"; or having one's restlessness concerning the Dhamma brought fully under control, after which the mind settles, steadies, and becomes unified on its own. In each case, once the path is born and followed, the fetters are abandoned and the underlying obsessions abolished.

§167 (AN 3:131), abridged. Ven. Anuruddha tells Ven. Sāriputta of his considerable meditative powers — seeing the thousandfold cosmos with the divine eye, aroused persistence, established mindfulness, a calm body, and a concentrated mind — yet his mind remains unreleased from the effluents. Sāriputta diagnoses each of these very achievements as related, respectively, to conceit, restlessness, and anxiety, and advises Anuruddha to set all three aside and direct his mind instead to the Deathless property itself. Doing so, Anuruddha soon attains full release.

§168 (MN 70), abridged. Two types of Awakened person are distinguished: one "released in both ways," who has directly touched the formless liberations with the body before ending the effluents through discernment, and one "released through discernment," who ends the effluents through discernment without having touched the formless liberations directly. Both are said to have completed their duty and are no longer capable of heedlessness.

§169–170 (SN 56:1, SN 22:5), abridged. "Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns things as they have come to be" — namely the four noble truths, and, in the second passage, the origination and disappearance of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, traced through the arising and cessation of delight, clinging, becoming, and birth.

§171 (Dhp 372). "There's no jhāna for one with no discernment, no discernment for one with no jhāna. But one with both jhāna and discernment: he's on the verge of Unbinding."

§172 (MN 111), abridged. Ven. Sāriputta, celebrated for his discernment, is described entering each jhāna and formless attainment in turn and "ferreting out," one by one, every quality present within it — applied thought, feeling, perception, intention, and so on — observing each arise, persist, and pass away, remaining unattracted and unrepelled throughout, and discerning each time that "there is a further escape." Completing the sequence through the cessation of feeling and perception, his effluents come to a total end. The passage concludes that anyone rightly describing mastery in virtue, concentration, discernment, and release would be rightly describing Sāriputta, who keeps the wheel of Dhamma rolling as the Tathāgata set it rolling.

§173–174 (AN 9:36, AN 11:17), abridged. The ending of the effluents is said to depend on each of the jhānas and formless attainments up through the dimension of nothingness — a monk who has developed a given jhāna regards the phenomena connected with it as inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and inclines his mind instead toward the peace of the Deathless, either reaching the ending of the effluents on the spot or, short of that, becoming due for rebirth in the Pure Abodes and total Unbinding from there.

§175 (AN 9:34), abridged. Ven. Sāriputta explains to Udāyin how Unbinding, despite involving "nothing felt," is genuinely pleasant: whenever a meditator absorbed in any jhāna or formless attainment is beset by attention to perceptions connected with a coarser level left behind — sensuality while in the first jhāna, directed thought while in the second, and so on — this itself counts as an affliction, and whatever is an affliction is a form of stress. By this reasoning, the complete absence of any such affliction, as in the cessation of feeling and perception, can rightly be understood as pleasant.

§176 (AN 9:37), abridged. Ven. Ānanda describes the direct realization of Unbinding, in which the senses and their objects remain present yet one is simply not sensitive to that dimension — a state that is nonetheless described as a kind of percipience, moving progressively through the four formless dimensions to a concentration "neither pressed down nor forced back," said by the Buddha to be the fruit of gnosis, the direct knowledge of Awakening.

§177 (AN 11:10), abridged. The Buddha contrasts an "unbroken colt of a man," absorbed in sensual passion or any of the hindrances the way an untrained horse tied to its trough thinks only of "Barley grain! Barley grain!," with a "thoroughbred," whose mind is absorbed dependent on nothing at all — neither the material elements, nor any formless dimension, nor this world or the next, nor anything seen, heard, sensed, or cognized — because the underlying perception of each of these has simply ceased to exist for him. Such a person is honored even by the devas, who declare: "We don't know even what, dependent on which, you're absorbed."

§178 (AN 6:64). "Knowledge of the ending of the effluents, as it has come to be, occurs to one who is concentrated, and not to one who is not concentrated. So concentration is the path; non-concentration is no path at all."

G. Equanimity in Concentration & Discernment

The fifth, reflective level of noble right concentration is where transcendent discernment can arise, and equanimity plays a central role throughout that process. The word covers two related senses in the texts: a neutral feeling free of both pleasure and pain, and a broader attitude of even-mindedness toward experience regardless of whether pleasure and pain are present. It is this second, broader sense that matters most here.

Passage §179 traces the emotional arc of practice in some detail. Contrary to a fairly common modern assumption, the texts find a genuinely skillful use even for the distress felt by someone who longs for a goal not yet attained: by focusing this distress on the unattained goal, rather than on unattained sensory pleasures, a practitioner's priorities become straightened out, and energy naturally redirects toward the path rather than toward sense-pleasure. As practice matures, this distress gives way to a joy grounded in genuine insight into the true nature of sensory objects, which in turn matures into an equanimity grounded in that same insight — what the texts call "equanimity dependent on multiplicity," equanimity in the face of the many different sense objects one encounters, sharply distinguished from the merely blind, unreflective equanimity of someone who has simply failed to notice a sense object's inconstant nature.

This equanimity dependent on multiplicity is not the final stage, however. Should a meditator go on to attain the formless jhānas, these support a further "equanimity dependent on singleness" — the singleness proper to formless absorption itself. From there, the process can mature into a state of complete equipoise the texts call *non-fashioning*: a meditator perceives that even the felt, refined equanimity of jhāna remains fabricated and willed, and grows so thoroughly dispassionate toward the entire process that no further present input into the shaping of experience takes place at all. Passages §180 and §181 describe how this even-mindedness is cultivated in three recognizable stages: first a conscious, deliberate turning of the mind toward equanimity in the presence of agreeable or disagreeable objects, illustrated by a series of graphic similes meant to help "tune" the mind toward the right attitude; then a stage of active training, in which a spontaneous disillusionment with agreeable or disagreeable objects begins to arise on its own; and finally a stage of fully developed faculties, in which one's even-mindedness has become so thoroughly mastered that one retains full control over one's own thought processes no matter what arises.

After Awakening, the ordinary processes of worldly experience continue on due to kammic momentum carried over from the past, but one's relationship to that experience is fundamentally changed, in line with whichever mental fetters have been cut by the Awakening attained. Passage §179 closes with three "frames of reference" describing the Buddha's own equanimity in his role as teacher: regardless of whether his disciples fail to heed his teaching, partly heed it, or fully heed it, he remains untroubled throughout, neither dissatisfied nor artificially satisfied, but simply equanimous, mindful, and alert. This passage makes an important point: the even-mindedness of someone fully awakened is not cold indifference but rather a settled mental imperturbability, combined with genuine sympathy and a real wish for others' well-being — a happiness that in no way depends on how others actually respond. This combination of deep care with complete equanimity is presented as the ideal disposition for anyone who genuinely works for the benefit of the world.

Selected Passages

§179 (MN 137), abridged. Thirty-six distinct emotions are analyzed across the six senses: six kinds each of joy, distress, and equanimity connected with ordinary "household" life, and six matching kinds connected with renunciation. Household joy and distress arise, respectively, from gaining or missing agreeable sense objects, or recalling such gains and losses after they have passed; renunciation joy and distress arise instead from direct insight into a sense object's inconstancy — including, distinctively, a form of distress that comes from *longing* for a liberation not yet attained, a longing the text explicitly endorses as skillful rather than as an obstacle. Renunciation equanimity — grounded in genuinely seeing a sense object's inconstancy — is to be relied upon in order to transcend mere household equanimity, which is simply a failure to notice that inconstancy in the first place. In turn, equanimity "dependent on multiplicity" (directed toward the six sense objects) is to be transcended by equanimity "dependent on singleness" (directed toward the formless attainments), which is itself finally to be transcended by non-fashioning. The passage closes with three "frames of reference," describing how the Buddha remains equanimous, mindful, and alert as a teacher, whether his disciples fail to heed his teaching, heed it only partly, or heed it fully.

§180 (MN 62), abridged. The Buddha instructs his son Rāhula to develop meditation "in tune with" earth, water, fire, wind, and space in turn: just as earth is not horrified or disgusted by whatever clean or unclean substance is

thrown upon it, and space cannot be said to be established anywhere at all, so too a mind developed along these lines will not allow agreeable or disagreeable sensory impressions, once arisen, to remain in charge of it.

§181 (MN 152), abridged. Three levels of sense-faculty development are distinguished. In the least developed level, when something agreeable, disagreeable, or mixed arises through any of the six senses, a monk simply feels the corresponding attraction or distress. In the middle stage — "a person in training" — a monk feels a natural revulsion at the reaction itself. In the fully developed noble one, upon noticing any such reaction, equanimity "takes its stance" almost instantaneously — likened variously to a man opening and closing his eyes, a strong man snapping his fingers, water rolling off a lotus leaf, or a few drops of water vanishing the moment they touch a pan heated all day — and, if he wishes, such a person can freely perceive the loathsome as unloathsome, the unloathsome as loathsome, both together, or set both aside entirely and simply remain equanimous, alert, and mindful.

§182 (MN 140), abridged. On reaching the fourth jhāna, only a pure, bright, luminous equanimity remains — compared to gold so thoroughly refined by a skilled goldsmith that it becomes workable into any ornament at all. The meditator recognizes, however, that directing even this refined equanimity toward any of the formless dimensions would itself still be a fabrication, and — neither fabricating nor willing anything further toward becoming or un-becoming — is no longer sustained by clinging to anything in the world. Unsustained, he is unagitated; unagitated, he is unbound right within, and knows directly: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world."

§183 (MN 113), abridged. A person without integrity, having attained any level of jhāna up through the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, notices his own attainment, compares himself to others who have not attained it, and grows conceited as a result. A person of integrity instead recalls that the Buddha spoke of non-fashioning with regard to every one of these attainments alike — "for by whatever means they construe it, it becomes otherwise from that" — and so neither exalts himself over the attainment nor disparages others for lacking it. Having fully transcended even the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception in this spirit, such a person of integrity goes on to attain the cessation of feeling and perception, sees with discernment, and brings the effluents to a complete end — a person, the passage concludes, who "does not construe anything, does not construe anywhere, does not construe in any way."

Closing Synthesis

Read together, these five sections trace a single arc. Conviction supplies the total context in which practice becomes possible at all — the social bonds, the intellectual grounding in kamma, and the practical follow-through without which the remaining faculties have nothing to work with. From that foundation, the abandoning of the hindrances clears the ground for concentration proper, removing the specific obstructions — sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness, and uncertainty — that would otherwise make sustained, unified awareness impossible. Right concentration then supplies the stability and refined pleasure within which discernment can do its most exacting work, while the relationship between concentration and discernment shows that neither faculty completes the path alone: a mind that is merely still, without insight, and a mind that merely reasons, without stability, both fall short of what full Awakening requires. Finally, equanimity threads through the entire sequence, maturing from a deliberately cultivated attitude toward pleasant and unpleasant objects, through refined states of formless absorption, to the complete non-fashioning in which the mind no longer contributes anything further to its own conditioning at all.

What unifies all five sections is the same practical orientation found throughout the larger work from which this volume is abridged: none of these qualities is meant to be cultivated in isolation, or valued for its own sake. Conviction that does not issue in ethical practice is not yet genuine conviction. Concentration that becomes an end in

itself, rather than a basis for insight, falls short of its purpose, however genuinely pleasant it may be. And equanimity that merely fails to notice inconstancy is not the same as the equanimity that has fully seen it and let it go. Each faculty is developed, in other words, not for its own sake but for the sake of the total skill the tradition calls release — the "further escape" that the texts return to again and again, from the first stirrings of conviction in a good friend's example to the final relinquishment that ends all fabrication.

RIGHT VIEW AND THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

An Abridged Study Guide

Condensed and reorganized from a longer source work, following the same outline: Part III, "The Basic Factors," Section H, "Discernment: Right View," with its four subsections on the Four Noble Truths.

This guide paraphrases and summarizes the original commentary and canonical passages in condensed form, with sutta references supplied throughout so that readers can consult the full source texts and their original translations directly.

Contents

Preface to This Abridgment

H. Discernment: Right View

  Key Passages on Right View (§184–187)

H.i The Four Noble Truths

  Key Passages on the Four Truths as a Set (§188–195)

H.ii The First Truth: Stress

  Key Passages on the First Truth (§196–207)

H.iii The Second and Third Truths: Craving and Its Cessation

  Key Passages on Dependent Co-Arising (§208–238)

H.iv The Fourth Truth: The Path

  Key Passages on the Fourth Truth (§239–240)

Glossary of Key Terms

Study Notes and Discussion Questions

Preface to This Abridgment

The source work this guide condenses is a commentary on the Pali Canon organized around what it calls the "basic factors" of Buddhist practice — conviction, virtue, generosity, listening, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. This abridgment covers only the final factor, discernment, and within it only the treatment of right view and the four noble truths. It keeps the original's numbering scheme (H, then i–iv) and passage-reference system (§184 onward) so that a reader moving between this guide and the full source, or between this guide and the Pali Canon itself, can follow along without getting lost.

Two kinds of condensing happen here. First, the discursive commentary has been summarized — shortened to its main claims and restated in different words rather than quoted. Second, the long canonical passages (many of which run to a page or more of formulaic repetition in the original translation) have been reduced to short paraphrased summaries with their sutta reference attached, rather than reproduced in full. Anyone who wants the primary material in its original translation should look up the cited sutta (e.g., "SN 12:15" refers to Samyutta Nikaya, chapter 12, discourse 15; "MN" is Majjhima Nikaya; "AN" is Anguttara Nikaya; "DN" is Digha Nikaya; "Ud" is Udana; "Iti" is Itivuttaka; "Dhp" is Dhammapada; "Thag/Thig" are the Verses of the Elder Monks/Nuns).

Context: Discernment Among the Basic Factors

The larger source work treats discernment as the last of eight "basic factors" of practice, lettered A through H, and it helps to know roughly what comes before it even though this abridgment does not cover those sections in detail. Conviction (factor A) is confidence, initially provisional, that the Buddha's account of kamma and the possibility of release is worth testing in one's own experience. Virtue (B) is the ethical restraint — particularly around the five precepts — that keeps the mind free of the agitation caused by harmful action, and so free to concentrate. Generosity (C) loosens the grip of possessiveness and builds the kind of trust in one's own goodness that supports later renunciation. Listening (D) refers to actually taking in the teaching from a qualified source rather than reinventing it badly from scratch. Persistence (E) is the sustained effort needed to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Mindfulness (F) is the capacity to keep a chosen object, or a chosen frame of reference, continuously present to awareness. Concentration (G) is the gathering of a scattered mind into unified, stable attention, most fully developed through jhana.

Discernment (H) does not simply come after these seven and use them as raw material; the source stresses that the factors are mutually reinforcing rather than strictly sequential. Discernment depends on the steadiness concentration provides and the continuous attention mindfulness supplies, while at the same time discernment is what allows concentration and mindfulness to be aimed correctly in the first place — at the aggregates, at dependent co-arising, at the four truths — rather than at some other, less useful object. This is why, near the end of the path, discernment and concentration are described as fusing into a single activity rather than remaining two separate factors working in parallel. What follows in this guide is the content of discernment specifically: what right view is, what it is aimed at, and how it eventually completes and transcends itself.

H. Discernment: Right View

The texts define right view as knowledge of the four noble truths. But the point of this definition is not to hand over a piece of doctrine to be believed. Right view is better understood as a way of sorting experience — a lens that classifies whatever arises in the mind according to its function: does this quality feed suffering, or does it lead away from suffering? Right view is defined by what it does, not merely by what it says.

Its function is to produce dispassion. By watching how craving and passion give rise to stress, the mind eventually sees passion clearly enough to stop identifying with it — to see it as "just an event," carrying no further meaning. That shift opens onto what the texts call non-fashioning: a state in which the mind stops manufacturing new experience, which is the doorway to awakening.

This is where right view becomes paradoxical. Among the forms of clinging identified in the causal chain of dependent co-arising is clinging to views. Right view, being a view, must eventually let go of itself as well. It does this in three movements. First, it looks at any view — including competing philosophical positions about self and cosmos — not for its content but simply as a mental event: something fabricated, conditioned, impermanent. Second, having done this to other views, it turns the same questioning on itself, seeing right view too as a conditioned event rather than a possession to defend. Third, once this even-handed dispassion is established, the mind can rest in a bare noting — "there is this" — without elaboration, which is the entryway to the perceptual mode the texts call "entry into emptiness," and from there to non-fashioning itself.

Because right view alone contains the seeds of its own transcendence, the tradition holds that no other approach can substitute for it. And its usefulness does not end at awakening: even an awakened person is said to go on using right view as a comfortable abiding, the way one might continue to use jhana, but now without any clinging attached to it.

It helps to notice what this account is not claiming. It is not saying that all views are equally valid, or that the wise response to disagreement is agnosticism. The non-attachment right view cultivates is compatible with holding a definite position — the four truths themselves are treated as real, not as one option among many. What changes is the psychological relationship to the position: it is held as a tool with a specific job, not as a possession that defines or protects a sense of self. A carpenter can be utterly convinced that a hammer is the right tool for driving a nail without the hammer becoming part of the carpenter's identity; right view is meant to function the same way, all the way up to and including the moment it is finally set down because the job is finished.

This also explains why the tradition treats right view as uniquely qualified among all possible doctrines to lead to awakening, rather than as merely one useful teaching among several equally effective ones. Any other view, by the logic laid out here, would still have to be transcended by something — and whatever did the transcending would, in effect, be functioning as right view under a different name. There is, in other words, no way to bypass this functional analysis of experience and reach the same destination by an entirely different psychological route.

These three movements of right view map onto the three stages of frames-of-reference meditation: (1) attending to a phenomenon simply in and of itself, without reference to outside meaning; (2) attending to how that phenomenon arises and passes away, as part of a causal process; (3) moving to the mode of "entry into emptiness," where even the noticing is not elaborated into a further story.

Right view is also said to operate on two scales at once — a small scale, dealing only with what is immediately present, and a large scale, covering the entire span of a being's wandering through many lifetimes. This is possible because the same causal principle applies at both scales: what keeps a being moving through the cosmos over time is the same kind of process, moment to moment, that keeps stress arising in the mind right now. This repetition of pattern across radically different scales is called "scale invariance," and it is treated as one of the most distinctive

and important features of the teaching: an insight into a single present moment turns out to have implications for an entire cosmic history, because both are instances of the same underlying "this/that" conditionality.

One further point deserves emphasis: because this process depends on seeing clearly rather than on accepting an idea secondhand, the source insists that right view cannot be transplanted by argument alone. A person can affirm every proposition in the four truths and still not have right view in the operative sense described here, if that affirmation has not actually been turned into a way of looking at present experience. This is one reason the tradition places such heavy weight on direct meditative observation — frames-of-reference practice, jhana, and the systematic study of the aggregates — alongside conceptual study of the doctrine. The concept without the practice remains inert; the practice without the concept has no way of knowing what it is looking for.

Key Passages on Right View (§184–187)

§184 (AN 1:181–82, 189–90): A well-known simile: just as a bitter seed planted in soil yields only bitter fruit, and a sweet seed yields sweet fruit, wrong view corrupts every action built on it, while right view makes every action built on it wholesome and beneficial.

§185 (AN 5:25): Right view bears its full fruit — release of awareness and release through discernment — only when supported by five further qualities: virtue, learning, discussion, tranquility, and insight.

§186 (SN 12:15, the Kaccayana Sutta): The Buddha tells Kaccayana that most people's view of the world is caught between the extremes of "existence" and "non-existence." Right view instead simply observes that stress arises when conditions for it are present and ceases when they are not, without resolving the question into either extreme, and without reference to a self behind the process.

§187 (AN 10:93): The householder Anathapindika is pressed by wanderers of other sects to state his views on classic metaphysical questions (is the cosmos eternal or not, finite or not, and so on). Rather than adopting a position, he shows that any such stance is itself a conditioned, fabricated thing — and therefore stressful to cling to — including the observation he has just made about all views being conditioned. The wanderers are left speechless.

H.i The Four Noble Truths

The image of the Buddha as a doctor is useful here: the four truths function like a diagnosis and treatment plan rather than a philosophical system. Critics who call the teaching pessimistic because it starts from suffering miss that this is a strategic starting point aimed at a complete cure — a much more ambitious goal than the ordinary wisdom of learning to tolerate life's mixture of good and bad.

The Buddha did not teach the four truths to everyone immediately. He typically prepared listeners with a graduated discourse — generosity, virtue, the rewards of heaven, the drawbacks of even those rewards, and the benefits of renunciation — before introducing the truths themselves. This mirrors the sequence of his own awakening, which likewise moved from insight into kamma's workings to insight into the ending of kamma altogether.

The four truths are offered as an alternative to two dichotomies most people use to organize experience: existence versus non-existence, and self versus other. Both are treated as dead ends. Existence and non-existence require settling questions about what lies behind experience — by definition, something that cannot itself be directly experienced. Self and other fare no better: any candidate for "self" fails the basic test of being under one's own full control, and any attempt to prove or disprove a self runs into the same unanswerable territory as the existence/non-existence question. Assuming a self commits one to maximizing its welfare (through exploiting or absorbing the "other"); denying any self collapses into a license for short-term pleasure-seeking. Both paths increase suffering.

Stress and its cessation avoid this trap because they are directly present in experience — even infants recognize pain long before they have any concept of self or being — and because working with them requires no further metaphysical commitments.

Each truth carries a specific duty. Stress is to be comprehended (not merely acknowledged, but understood through patient, mindful observation). Craving, its origination, is to be abandoned — note that "craving" here means specifically the desire that leads to further becoming, not all desire; the desire to be free of craving is itself part of the path, and even that desire is finally let go of once the goal is reached. Cessation is to be realized, which folds together both the successful abandoning of craving and the recognition of what that abandoning uncovers. And the path is to be developed, a twofold task of both cultivating the conditions for clear knowing and abstaining from actions that would obstruct it.

In practice these four duties are not really separate operations performed in sequence but four aspects of a single unfolding: comprehending stress removes craving's object, which is what abandoning craving means; the resulting cessation is realized as this happens; and all of it is accomplished by developing the path. Passage §195 breaks each truth into three levels of knowledge — recognizing the truth, recognizing its duty, and recognizing that the duty has been fulfilled — for a total of twelve permutations. This twelve-part pattern is the origin of the twelve-spoked Wheel of Dhamma as a symbol: twelve permutations converging on a single hub, the state of non-fashioning.

As practice matures, the four truths are said to converge. The very faculties used to investigate stress — jhana and discernment — are eventually seen to be composed of the same aggregates as stress itself, and clinging to them becomes the last obstacle to release. At that point the distinctions among the four truths begin to dissolve, jhana and discernment fuse into a single activity, and the mind arrives at non-fashioning: nothing further to do, know, or complete.

It is worth pausing on why the source insists these four are duties rather than descriptions to be accepted. A description invites agreement or disagreement; a duty invites action. Treating stress as something "to be comprehended" rather than simply "true" changes what a person actually does upon hearing the first truth: instead of debating whether life really is unsatisfactory, the listener is pointed toward a specific task — watching stress arise and pass away with enough patience and precision to see its structure clearly. The same holds for the other three.

This is part of why the text calls the four truths categories of "appropriate attention" rather than articles of belief: they tell the practitioner where to look and what to do once looking, not merely what to conclude.

The rejection of the being/non-being and self/other dichotomies is not a side note but load-bearing for the whole system. If either dichotomy were adopted as the basic frame for interpreting experience, the four truths would collapse into just another metaphysical position to be defended, and would lose the self-transcending quality described in the discussion of right view above. By contrast, stress and its cessation can be worked with entirely in terms of what is directly present or absent, without first having to settle unanswerable questions about ultimate existence or the nature of the self — which is precisely what keeps the four truths from becoming one more entry in the "thicket of views" they are meant to cut through.

Key Passages on the Four Truths as a Set (§188–195)

§188 (SN 56:31, the Simsapa Leaves): Holding a handful of leaves against the whole forest overhead, the Buddha says what he has taught is a small fraction of what he directly knows — he has taught only what is useful for reaching dispassion and Unbinding, namely the four noble truths.

§189 (AN 6:63): A short catechism defining stress as the five clinging-aggregates, its cause as craving, and noting that unresolved pain in a person tends to result either in bewilderment or in a search for a way out — the search that right practice redirects toward genuine release.

§190 (SN 56:27): States plainly that all four truths are real, not otherwise, and that they are one's ongoing duty to contemplate.

§191 (SN 56:36): An extended simile: a person who fully understands the four truths escapes the vast realms of lower rebirth, likened to the near-impossibility of impaling every minute creature in the sea with stakes made from all the vegetation in India.

§192 (SN 56:46): The deepest "darkness" is not any physical darkness the sun and moon fail to illuminate, but the condition of not knowing the four truths, which causes beings to keep fabricating further birth, aging, and death.

§193 (SN 56:35): Even the hypothetical prospect of being stabbed with hundreds of spears daily for a hundred years would be worth accepting if it culminated in realizing the four truths — because such realization, the Buddha says, is accompanied by pleasure and happiness, not more pain, given how much worse the pain of beginningless wandering already is.

§194 (SN 56:20): Ven. Gavampati recalls the Buddha's teaching that seeing any one of the four truths clearly entails seeing all four — they are not separable insights.

§195 (SN 56:11, Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion): The Buddha's own account of his awakening: full clarity on each truth, at each of three levels (recognizing it, recognizing its duty, recognizing the duty fulfilled) — twelve permutations total — was the condition for his claim to have reached unexcelled awakening.

H.ii The First Truth: Stress

Stress (dukkha) is often translated as suffering, but the term also carries the sense of dis-ease and, most basically, pain. Because people first learn to cope with pain in early childhood, before they have verbal or reflective capacities, many of the strategies they adopt toward pain are unskillful and remain in place, unexamined, well into adulthood.

A central insight behind the Buddha's awakening was that comprehending pain — rather than simply trying to escape it, in line with habitual reactions — is the essential spiritual work. Pain, precisely because it is so hard to ignore, functions like a watering hole where all the mind's hidden, subconscious tendencies eventually show themselves; a meditator who can stay with pain without flinching gets to observe those tendencies directly. This is difficult, which is why discernment needs the support of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration — qualities that give the mind the steadiness and detachment needed to look at pain without being overwhelmed by it or fleeing into distraction.

The analytic tool for this comprehension is the five aggregates: form (all physical phenomena), feeling (pleasant, painful, or neutral sensation), perception (the labeling of experience), fabrications (the mental and verbal activity of constructing thoughts, intentions, and questions), and consciousness (bare cognizance at any of the six sense doors, including the mind as a sense). Together these cover the entire range of describable experience.

The aggregates themselves are not the problem. They become stressful only when clung to — the Pali term upadana carries both the sense of the act of clinging and the fuel that is clung to, drawing on the image of a fire that takes sustenance from what it burns. This fire imagery runs throughout the texts: pain is likened to fever or flame, the aggregates (khandha) share their name with a tree trunk, and the goal itself, nibbana, literally refers to a fire's going out for lack of fuel — not annihilation, but release from bondage to burning.

Four kinds of clinging are identified: to sensuality, to views, to habits and practices, and to theories of self. Clinging is neither identical to the aggregates nor separate from them — if it were identical, an awakened person could never again experience the aggregates without clinging; if wholly separate, clinging would exist independently and its transcendence at awakening would leave the deeper task unfinished. The actual relationship (desire and passion directed at the aggregates) allows a full understanding of the aggregates to be sufficient for awakening while still leaving room for the aggregates to continue functioning afterward, without further clinging.

Two features of the aggregates are especially worth examining: their instability (they are inconstant, so nothing built on them offers stable happiness) and their complexity (feeling, perception, and consciousness, for instance, are so tightly interwoven that ordinary awareness mistakes them for a single whole). Investigating this complexity leads directly into dependent co-arising — the subject of the second and third truths.

It is worth being precise about what "comprehending" pain does and does not mean in this system. It does not mean approving of pain, romanticizing it, or declining to seek relief from remediable physical causes. It means refusing to let the mind's habitual, largely unconscious strategies for handling pain run unexamined. Those strategies — distraction, denial, story-telling about blame or meaning, bargaining — are themselves fabrications, built from the same aggregates under discussion, and they are usually what generates the bewilderment the source describes rather than the raw sensation itself. Comprehension in this technical sense is closer to a scientist's patient observation of a phenomenon than to either stoic endurance or emotional processing as ordinarily understood, though it draws on resources from both.

Key Passages on the First Truth (§196–207)

§196 (SN 56:14): Identifies the noble truth of stress directly with the six internal sense media — eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.

§197 (SN 35:28, the Fire Sermon): The senses, their objects, the resulting consciousness, contact, and whatever feeling arises from that contact are all described as "aflame" — burning with passion, aversion, and delusion.

§198 (DN 22, the Great Frames of Reference Discourse): The classic definition: birth, aging, death, sorrow, and every form of not getting what one wants are stress; in short, the five clinging-aggregates are stress. Each term (birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair) is then defined precisely.

§199 (MN 109): The Buddha explains that clinging is neither the same as the five aggregates nor separate from them, and defines the causal basis for each aggregate's manifestation (the four elements for form, contact for feeling/perception/fabrications, name-and-form for consciousness).

§200 (SN 22:79): Playful etymologies: form is called such because it is "afflicted" by heat, cold, hunger; feeling because it "feels"; perception because it "perceives" qualities like color; fabrications because they "fabricate" the fabricated aggregates; consciousness because it "cognizes".

§201 (MN 43): Feeling, perception, and consciousness are declared to be so conjoined that they cannot be pulled apart and described separately — what one feels, one perceives; what one perceives, one cognizes.

§202 (MN 28, the Great Elephant's Footprint Simile): A detailed analysis of form in terms of the four properties — earth (solidity), liquid, fire, and wind — each traced through the body and shown to be, internally and externally, simply that property, not-self.

§203 (MN 28): Even the vast external earth, water, fire, and wind properties are subject to catastrophic change (the ocean drying up, fire going out for lack of fuel) — so how much less can this short-lived body, made of the same properties, be taken as "mine" or "self."

§204 (MN 44): Sister Dhammadinna distinguishes pleasant, painful, and neutral feeling, and notes their distinct character: pleasant feeling is pleasant while it lasts and painful when it changes; painful feeling is the reverse; neutral feeling is pleasant when accompanied by knowledge, painful when not.

§205 (SN 22:56): Defines fabrications as the six classes of intention aimed at the six sense objects.

§206 (DN 33): Classifies fabrications into three kinds: meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable (the formless jhanas).

§207 (MN 38): Consciousness is named only by its condition of arising — eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, and so on — just as a fire is named by its fuel (a log fire, a rubbish fire).

H.iii The Second and Third Truths: Craving and Its Cessation

Because the third truth (cessation) is defined simply as the successful completion of the duty belonging to the second (abandoning craving), the source treats them together.

The short definitions: the origination of stress is craving that makes for further becoming, occurring in three forms — craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming (the desire for something currently existing to be destroyed or ended). The cessation of stress is the complete fading and ending of that same craving — its relinquishment and release, not achieved anywhere else than exactly where the craving arose in the first place, namely with regard to whatever in the world is "endearing and alluring": the senses, their objects, the consciousness, contact, and feeling associated with them, and the intentions, thoughts, and evaluations built on top.

The detailed mechanism is dependent co-arising, described as the deepest and most difficult teaching in the Canon. A few orienting principles are worth holding onto before the details. First, dependent co-arising expands a more basic principle called "this/that conditionality," stated as a four-part formula: when this is, that is; from the arising of this comes the arising of that; when this isn't, that isn't; from the ceasing of this comes the ceasing of that. Two of these lines describe how things are related across time (arising, ceasing) and two describe how things are related in the present moment (is, isn't) — so the process is not simply a chain of causes strung out in sequence; conditions from the past and conditions active right now both bear on any given event simultaneously, which opens the door to numerous feedback loops.

Second, the canonical imagery for this process is fluid, not mechanical — rivers and tides overflowing into one another, not gears turning a wheel (the wheel image for dependent co-arising appears only in later, non-canonical texts). Third, this fluid instability is precisely why the process is stressful and not-self, and why happiness can never be found by identifying with any part of it, including a supposedly larger, interconnected identity encompassing all things — the Pali canon insists on a hard line between the fabricated and the Unfabricated, rather than treating one as secretly contained in the other.

The most basic list of factors, working backward from aging-and-death, runs: aging-and-death depends on birth; birth depends on becoming (the coming-into-being of a sensual, form, or formless realm of experience — compared to a dream image appearing in the mind, with birth being the act of entering that image and taking on an identity within it); becoming depends on clinging/sustenance; clinging depends on craving; craving depends on feeling; feeling depends on contact; contact depends on name-and-form (name being feeling, perception, contact, attention, and intention; form being the physical properties); and name-and-form depends, mutually, on consciousness at the six senses — each requiring the other, like two sheaves of reeds leaning against each other for support.

Fuller lists add further factors upstream: the six sense media between contact and name-and-form, and, further back, three kinds of fabrication (bodily = the breath; verbal = directed thought and evaluation; mental = feeling and perception) conditioned by ignorance of the four noble truths. The source argues these additional factors do not introduce anything genuinely new — they simply re-describe the same mutual dependency between name-and-form and consciousness from another angle, with the added value of showing exactly where ignorance operates: in the "verbal fabrication" of inappropriate questioning, which then skews the "attention" factor within name. A further variant traces ignorance itself back to four effluents (of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance), which shows how the whole system is self-sustaining — each round of ignorance and craving feeds the next.

Because the process is self-reinforcing but not perfectly deterministic, it allows genuine openings for practice. The key distinction is between links where one factor is a sufficient cause for the next (x always produces y — for example, contact always gives rise to some feeling, and clinging always gives rise to becoming and stress, so these links cannot be cut) and links where a factor is a necessary but not sufficient cause (x must be present for y, but y does not automatically follow unless ignorance is also present — as with feeling and craving, or craving and clinging). It is precisely at these necessary-but-not-sufficient links that appropriate attention can intervene, replacing

ignorance with clear knowing and so preventing the next link from arising. Because feeling in particular resurfaces at several points in the sequence (it can feed back in as fabrication, as an instance of name, or directly as feeling again), it is an especially important junction — how one attends to feeling can either aggravate the cycle or begin to unwind it.

The source describes three viable points of entry for practice, corresponding to the three lists of factors above, and treats them as equally valid alternative strategies rather than competing theories: (1) working at the mutual dependency of consciousness and name-and-form directly, using skillful intention and appropriate attention to strip away passion first for the objects of consciousness, then for the very approach used to do the stripping; (2) working through the mastery of jhana, using the breath (which draws together all three types of fabrication) to build the concentration needed to see through the willed, fabricated nature of jhana itself and any assumptions underlying it; (3) working at the level of becoming and clinging, carefully avoiding the trap of substituting a craving for non-becoming (self-annihilation) for a craving for becoming — both are still becoming's orbit — until the only remaining option is the equipoise of non-fashioning.

As jhana and discernment fuse near the end of the path, intention (which drives jhana) and attention (which monitors it) collapse into each other and effectively cancel each other out. What remains at that point is not annihilation but "consciousness without surface, without end, luminous all around" — a state the texts place beyond the reach of ordinary designation altogether, which is why some passages identify it with the goal itself and others distinguish it carefully from the third noble truth: the third truth (cessation of craving) is a fabricated achievement reached through duty and practice, while the goal it uncovers is entirely unfabricated, found together with that achievement but not identical to it. An awakened person continues, until the death of the body, to experience feeling arising from old kamma — sensitivity to pleasure and pain without any of the fetters, passions, or attachments that would turn that feeling into new becoming — likened to embers that are still warm though the fire itself has gone out; full Unbinding at death is the final cooling of those embers.

A practical way to hold all of this together is to remember that dependent co-arising is not primarily a cosmological theory to be memorized but a diagnostic tool to be applied to whatever is happening in the mind right now. When irritation arises, for instance, the useful question is not "where does this fit in the twelve-link formula" as an abstract exercise, but something closer to: what feeling preceded this reaction, what contact gave rise to that feeling, and is there craving already forming around either the continuation or the ending of what is being felt? Approached this way, the formula stops being a doctrine to accept and becomes a set of questions that can be asked of direct experience, which is how the source insists it was originally discovered and how it is meant to be used.

It is also worth noting what the three points of entry have in common, since their differences can obscure a shared structure. In every case, the operative move is to bring appropriate attention to bear on some already-present factor — an object of consciousness, a state of jhana, an instance of becoming — precisely at the moment ignorance would otherwise convert it into fuel for the next link in the chain. None of the three approaches asks the practitioner to suppress or forcibly eliminate the factor in question; each instead asks for a clearer and steadier seeing of it, on the premise (borne out, the source argues, by direct experience) that sufficiently clear seeing is itself what starves the process of its fuel.

Key Passages on Dependent Co-Arising (§208–238)

§208 (Dhammapada 338): A tree cut down but with its root intact grows back; likewise, suffering keeps returning as long as the root of craving is not uprooted.

§209 (SN 42:11): The Buddha leads the village headman Gandhabhaka to see, from his own experience, that grief over any person's misfortune tracks exactly the desire and passion he feels for that person — and generalizes: all past and future stress has desire as its root.

§210 (DN 22): The formal definitions of the second and third truths, specifying that craving arises and is abandoned at exactly the same points: wherever anything is "endearing and alluring" in the world (each sense base, its object, the resulting consciousness, contact, feeling, perception, intention, craving, and patterns of thought built on all of these).

§211 (AN 10:92): The full twelve-link formula of dependent co-arising in both forward (arising) and reverse (ceasing) order, from ignorance through fabrications, consciousness, name-and-form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, to aging-and-death.

§212 (SN 35:107): "The origination of the world" and "the disappearance of the world" are defined, at each sense door, in terms of the same causal chain from contact through feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, and birth to stress — identifying "world" with this process rather than an external cosmos.

§213 (SN 35:82): "World" (loka) is explained through wordplay as that which "disintegrates" (lujjati) — the senses, their objects, and everything dependent on them.

§214 (SN 35:116): Ven. Ananda explains a cryptic saying of the Buddha's: the "world" whose end must be reached to end stress is defined by whatever gives rise to a perception or concept of world — the six senses — not a place one could travel to.

§215 (SN 12:33): Sariputta's exposition of "44 bases of knowledge": for each link in the chain (aging-and-death, birth, becoming, and so on), one should know the phenomenon, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation — knowledge that, once purified, marks a disciple as having reached the stream to the deathless.

§216 (MN 28): A famous equation: whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma, and whoever sees the Dhamma sees dependent co-arising.

§217 (SN 12:20): Dependent co-arising is described as a fixed "regularity of the Dhamma" that holds whether or not a Buddha ever appears to discover and teach it; seeing it clearly, a disciple stops being drawn into speculation about the past, future, or a present self.

§218 (SN 12:2): The standard definitions of each of the twelve factors — becoming, clinging, craving, feeling, contact, the six sense media, name-and-form, consciousness, fabrications, and ignorance.

§219 (SN 12:19): Both a fool and a wise person experience contact and feeling through the same conditioned process; the difference is that the wise person has abandoned the ignorance and craving that would otherwise turn that feeling into a new body at death.

§220 (AN 3:76–77): Ananda's exchange with the Buddha on "becoming": kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture that allows renewed becoming to sprout in a given realm.

§221 (Udana 3:10): A verse from just after the Buddha's awakening: the world is burning with passion, aversion, and delusion; liberation is not found through more becoming, nor through willing non-becoming, but through the ending of all clinging and craving for becoming itself.

§222 (Itivuttaka 49): Two ways people go wrong in relation to becoming: some cling to and delight in it outright; others, disgusted with it, swing to the opposite extreme of craving annihilation. Those with vision instead see what has come to be as what has come to be, and practice for disenchantment and cessation.

§223 (MN 44): Sister Dhammadinna defines the three fabrications in their present-moment sense: bodily fabrication is the breath; verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation; mental fabrication is perception and feeling.

§224 (SN 12:25): Pleasure and pain arise internally through bodily, verbal, or mental fabrication built on ignorance; with the ending of ignorance, the very field on which such pleasure and pain could arise no longer exists.

§225 (SN 12:51): A monk free of effluents no longer fabricates meritorious, demeritorious, or imperturbable states; with no fabrication, consciousness has nothing to land on, and the whole chain down to aging-and-death has nothing to support it — likened to a hot jar set down to cool, its heat dissipating while the clay remains until the end of the present life.

§226 (SN 12:38): When nothing is willed, arranged, or obsessed over, consciousness has no support on which to "land," cutting off the production of renewed becoming and, with it, future birth and stress.

§227 (MN 9): Sariputta traces ignorance back to the effluents and the effluents back to ignorance — a mutually reinforcing pair — with the noble eightfold path as the way to end both.

§228 (SN 12:67): The famous "two sheaves of reeds" image: name-and-form and consciousness support each other the way two bundles of reeds lean on one another to stay upright; pull either one away and both collapse. Neither factor is self-made, other-made, both, or spontaneously arisen — each simply depends on the other.

§229 (Udana 6:6): A verse on the two extremes of "made by me" and "made by another" as a thorn that binds people caught in conceit and views.

§230 (SN 12:35): Asked "whose" aging-and-death or birth this is, the Buddha rejects the question itself as invalid, since it presupposes either that a self is identical to the body or separate from it — both extremes the middle teaching of dependent co-arising avoids.

§231 (DN 15, the Great Causes Discourse): A step-by-step verification with Ananda of each causal link back to the mutual dependency of consciousness and name-and-form, concluding that this mutual dependency marks "the extent to which" birth, aging, death, and the manifesting of the world can be described at all.

§232 (SN 35:93): Consciousness arising in dependence on any sense and its object is shown to be as inconstant and changeable as the pair it depends on — it cannot be constant if its very cause is not.

§233 (SN 22:53): Consciousness "takes a stance" on and grows through attachment to the aggregates; a monk who abandons passion for the aggregates cuts off that support, so consciousness becomes unestablished, steady, and released.

§234 (SN 12:64): Four "nutriments" sustain beings: physical food, contact, consciousness, and intention. Passion for any of them lets consciousness "land" and grow into renewed becoming, likened to a ray of sunlight landing on whatever surface is in its path; with no passion, there is nothing for it to land on.

§235 (DN 11, the Kevatta Sutta): A verse describing "consciousness without surface, without end, luminous all around," where the four physical properties, and even name-and-form, find no footing.

§236 (Udana 1:10): A companion verse on the same theme: where the four properties find no footing, ordinary points of reference (sun, moon, stars, darkness) do not apply, and the sage is freed from form and formless, pleasure and pain.

§237 (SN 22:81): The Buddha teaches that any assumption about the aggregates as self, as possessing self, as containing self, or as contained in self, along with eternalist or annihilationist views and simple doubt, all count as fabrications conditioned by feeling born of contact with ignorance — seeing this clearly ends the effluents without delay.

§238 (SN 12:23): A chain of "prerequisites" running the reverse direction from ordinary dependent co-arising: just as rain fills mountain streams which fill ponds which fill lakes which fill rivers which fill the ocean, fabrications (conditioned by ignorance) lead in turn to stress, and stress — rightly met — leads to conviction, joy, rapture, serenity, pleasure, concentration, knowledge of things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, release, and finally knowledge of release itself.

H.iv The Fourth Truth: The Path

The fourth truth, the way leading to the cessation of stress, is the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Because this path is treated at length elsewhere in the larger source work, the closing passages here focus on the Buddha's own discovery of it and its verification at the very end of his life.

Passage §239 recounts, in the Buddha's own words, the step-by-step reasoning by which — before his awakening, simply through appropriate attention — he worked backward through the causal chain from aging-and-death to the mutual dependency of consciousness and name-and-form, and then worked forward again through the reverse (cessation) sequence. He compares the discovery to finding an overgrown ancient path leading to a long-abandoned city, and then simply following that path himself and reporting its existence to others so that they, too, could travel it — rather than inventing something new.

Passage §240 gives the last recorded conversation of the Buddha's life, with the wanderer Subhadda, on the very night of his final passing. Asked to adjudicate between rival teachers' claims to full awakening, the Buddha sets the question aside and instead states the criterion plainly: wherever the noble eightfold path is present, genuine attainment is possible; wherever it is absent, it is not. Subhadda asks for and receives ordination on the spot, becomes an arahant within a short time, and is recorded as the last person to be personally ordained by the Buddha.

One implication worth drawing out is what this account suggests about the relationship between teacher and teaching. If the path is a rediscovery of something that was already true — a "regularity of the Dhamma" that holds whether or not any Buddha ever appears, as passage §217 puts it — then the Buddha's authority rests specifically on having found and verified the path, not on having invented or willed it into existence. This has practical consequences for how a student is meant to relate to the teaching: not as a claim to be accepted on the teacher's personal authority, but as a set of directions to an actual place, checkable in principle by anyone willing to walk the same route and look for themselves.

The Subhadda episode makes the same point from a different angle, at the most dramatically weighted possible moment — the Buddha's final hours. Rather than using his last conversation to make sweeping claims about his own unique status relative to rival teachers, the Buddha reduces the entire question to a single, checkable criterion: is the eightfold path present or not. This is consistent with the treatment of right view throughout this guide — the tradition consistently prefers functional, verifiable criteria (does this practice lead to dispassion, to release, to the ending of stress?) over claims that would have to be taken on faith or settled by appeal to authority.

Key Passages on the Fourth Truth (§239–240)

§239 (SN 12:65): The Buddha's pre-awakening reconstruction of dependent co-arising in both arising and ceasing order, likened to rediscovering and reporting an ancient, overgrown road to a forgotten city rather than building something new.

§240 (DN 16, the Buddha's Last Days): On the night of the Buddha's final passing, the wanderer Subhadda asks whether various rival teachers have genuine attainment. The Buddha replies that genuine attainment (of any of the four levels) is found only where the noble eightfold path is present, ordains Subhadda despite the usual four-year probation period, and Subhadda becomes the last person awakened during the Buddha's lifetime under his direct guidance.

How the Parts Fit Together

It can be easy to lose the forest for the trees across four truths, twelve links, five aggregates, and a dozen technical terms, so it is worth closing with a single-page view of the whole shape.

Right view is the lens; the four noble truths are what it is trained on. The first truth names the problem precisely (the five clinging-aggregates) rather than vaguely ("life is hard"). The second truth names the mechanism that turns those aggregates into a problem — craving, understood not as desire in general but as the specific desire for further becoming or for annihilation. The third truth is simply what remains once that craving has genuinely stopped: not a new state added on top of experience, but the absence of the very thing that was generating stress. The fourth truth is the concrete, practical means — the eightfold path — for bringing that craving to an end, rather than merely wishing it away.

Dependent co-arising is the fine print underneath the second and third truths: it specifies exactly how craving gets started (through contact, feeling, and ignorance) and exactly where it can be interrupted (at any of the several links that are necessary, but not sufficient, causes for what follows). The three different lists of factors are not competing theories but three magnifications of the same lens, useful for different practitioners or different moments of practice.

The whole system is held together by a single causal principle — this/that conditionality — which applies equally to a single mind-moment and to the entire span of a being's wandering through many lives. This is what allows a practice conducted entirely in the present moment to have implications the source describes as cosmic in scope: not because the practitioner is asked to take anything on faith about far-off realms, but because the same mechanism that can be observed directly, right now, is said to be the one operating at every scale.

Finally, the entire structure is designed to be self-liquidating. Right view undercuts attachment to views, including itself; the path is a set of fabricated activities aimed at ending fabrication; jhana and discernment are used as tools and then, at the point of their greatest refinement, are seen through as themselves impermanent and not-self. Nothing in the system is meant to be clung to as a final resting place short of the goal it points toward — which is precisely what distinguishes this account of right view from an ordinary philosophical position, and what the source means when it says right view contains the seeds of its own transcendence.

Glossary of Key Terms

Dukkha — Stress, suffering, dis-ease, pain — the first noble truth; the basic unsatisfactoriness of any experience built on conditioned, changeable phenomena.

Tanha — Craving; literally "thirst." The second noble truth. Comes in three forms: for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming.

Upadana — Clinging/sustenance. The act of clinging to the aggregates as an object, likened to a fire taking fuel; also the fuel itself.

Khandha — Aggregate. The five categories — form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness — that together describe all experience.

Sankhara — Fabrications; the mental (and sometimes bodily/verbal) activity of constructing thoughts, intentions, and experience. One of the five aggregates and also a link in dependent co-arising.

Avijja — Ignorance; specifically, not knowing the four noble truths. The root condition in dependent co-arising.

Paticca samuppada — Dependent co-arising; the twelve-link (or shorter) causal chain describing how ignorance and craving give rise to stress, and how their cessation ends it.

Idappaccayata — "This/that conditionality"; the underlying four-part causal principle beneath dependent co-arising, describing both present-moment and across-time relationships.

Nibbana (Unbinding) — The goal; literally the going-out of a fire for lack of fuel — not annihilation but release from the processes that sustain suffering.

Jhana — Meditative absorption; states of concentrated, unified attention cultivated as part of the path and eventually seen through as fabricated.

Sammaditthi — Right view; the first path factor and the subject of this guide — knowledge of the four noble truths used as a functional lens on experience, including on itself.

Asava — Effluents; deep-seated outflows of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance that sustain the cycle of rebirth until fully ended.

Nama-rupa — Name-and-form; "name" covering feeling, perception, contact, attention, and intention, and "form" covering physical phenomena — together, in mutual dependency with consciousness, forming the basis for the rest of experience.

Vipassana — Insight; the mode of investigation that examines phenomena for their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self quality, typically paired with the steadying influence of concentration.

Anicca — Inconstancy or impermanence; one of the three characteristics used to examine the aggregates and undercut clinging to them.

Anatta — Not-self; the finding that none of the five aggregates meets the criteria for a true, controllable self, and so none is fit to be taken as "me" or "mine."

Kamma (Karma) — Intentional action and its results; the field in which consciousness, as a "seed," takes root through craving's "moisture" to produce renewed becoming.

Bhava — Becoming; the coming-into-being of a sensual, form, or formless realm of experience, compared in the source to a dream image appearing to a drowsy mind.

Vedana — Feeling; the pleasant, painful, or neutral tone of any experience, arising from contact and forming the pivotal link where craving either does or does not take hold.

Vinnana — Consciousness; bare cognizance at one of the six sense doors (including the intellect as a sense), named only by the condition through which it arises, as fire is named by its fuel.

Study Notes and Discussion Questions

On Right View

• In what sense can a "view" be designed to undermine attachment to views, including itself? Try restating this in your own words without using the word "paradox."

• The text says right view is defined by its function rather than its content. What would it mean to hold a doctrinally correct belief without it functioning as right view?

• "Scale invariance" claims that the same causal pattern shows up in a single moment of stress and in the entire span of a being's wandering through many lives. What would change about how you practiced if you took this claim seriously?

On the First Truth

• The guide compares pain to a "watering hole" where the mind's hidden tendencies come into view. Where in your own life have you noticed a difficult feeling reveal something you weren't otherwise aware of?

• Why might it matter that clinging is described as "neither the same as the aggregates nor separate from them", rather than simply saying the aggregates themselves are the problem?

On the Second and Third Truths

• The text distinguishes links in dependent co-arising that are "sufficient" causes (which cannot be interrupted) from those that are merely "necessary" causes (which can be, given the added presence of ignorance). Which links fall into which category, and why does that distinction matter practically?

• Three different "points of entry" into practice are described — through consciousness and name-and-form, through mastering jhana, and through becoming and clinging. Do these feel like genuinely different approaches to you, or three descriptions of the same thing from different angles?

• Why is craving for non-becoming (wanting to be rid of something, including oneself) treated as being just as much a form of becoming as craving for something to continue?

On the Fourth Truth

• The Buddha compares his discovery of the path to finding an old, overgrown road rather than building a new one. What does this metaphor suggest about the relationship between the teaching and the teacher?

• In the story of Subhadda, the Buddha sidesteps a comparative question about which teacher is genuinely awakened and instead names a single criterion: the presence of the eightfold path. What does this suggest about how to evaluate spiritual claims generally?

• The path is described as fabricated activity aimed at ending fabrication — a tool that is eventually set down rather than kept. Can you think of other skills or practices, inside or outside a spiritual context, that work the same way?

General Review

• Try restating each of the four noble truths in one plain sentence, without using any Pali terms. Then try restating them again using only the technical vocabulary in the glossary. What is gained and lost in each version?

• The source repeatedly warns against two opposite errors: clinging to becoming, and craving for non-becoming (annihilation). Where in ordinary life — not necessarily meditation — do you see people caught in one or the other of these two extremes?

• If someone asked you to summarize "right view" in a single sentence for a friend with no background in Buddhist thought, what would you say?

Appendix: Passages by Source Collection

The passages summarized in this guide are drawn from across the Pali Canon. The list below groups them by collection so that a reader interested in, say, everything drawn from the Samyutta Nikaya, or everything drawn from the Majjhima Nikaya, can find those passages at a glance. Passage numbers refer to the § numbering used throughout this guide, which follows the numbering of the source work.

Digha Nikaya (DN) — the "Long Discourses"

• §198 (DN 22) — the classic definition of the first noble truth

• §211 is drawn from AN, not DN — see Anguttara Nikaya below

• §210 (DN 22) — the formal definitions of the second and third truths

• §231 (DN 15) — the Great Causes Discourse, verifying dependent co-arising step by step

• §235 (DN 11) — "consciousness without surface"

• §240 (DN 16) — the Buddha's last conversation, with Subhadda

Majjhima Nikaya (MN) — the "Middle-Length Discourses"

• §199 (MN 109) — clinging and the aggregates

• §201 (MN 43) — feeling, perception, and consciousness as inseparable

• §202–203 (MN 28) — the four properties analyzed in the body and the world

• §204, §223 (MN 44) — Sister Dhammadinna on feeling and on the three fabrications

• §207 (MN 38) — consciousness named by its condition, likened to fire

• §216, §228 (MN 28) — “whoever sees dependent co-arising sees the Dhamma” and the two sheaves of reeds

• §227 (MN 9) — Sariputta on ignorance and the effluents

Samyutta Nikaya (SN) — the “Connected Discourses”

• §186 (SN 12:15) — the Kaccayana Sutta on avoiding existence/non-existence

• §188 (SN 56:31) — the simsapa leaves

• §190–192, §194–196 (SN 56 series) — short teachings on the four truths as a set

• §197 (SN 35:28) — the Fire Sermon

• §209 (SN 42:11) — the headman Gandhabhaka on desire as the root of sorrow

• §212–215, §217–219 (SN 35 and SN 12 series) — “world,” dependent co-arising, and its definitions

• §224–226, §230, §232–234, §237–238 (SN 12 and SN 22 series) — fabrication, consciousness, and cessation

• §239 (SN 12:65) — the ancient path and city

Anguttara Nikaya (AN) — the “Numerical Discourses”

• §184 (AN 1:181–82, 189–90) — the seed simile

• §185 (AN 5:25) — the five supporting factors for right view

• §187 (AN 10:93) — Anathapindika and the wanderers

• §189, §193 (AN 6:63, AN 56:35) — the definition and value of realizing the four truths

• §211 (AN 10:92) — the full twelve-link formula

• §220 (AN 3:76–77) — kamma as field, consciousness as seed, craving as moisture

Udana (Ud), Itivuttaka (Iti), and Dhammapada (Dhp) — shorter verse collections

- §208 (Dhp 338) — the tree that grows back
- §221 (Ud 3:10) — “this world is burning”
- §222 (Iti 49) — adhering to becoming versus slipping into non-becoming
- §229 (Ud 6:6) — the thorn of “made by me” and “made by another”
- §236 (Ud 1:10) — the companion verse to §235

Frequently Confused Terms

A handful of distinctions in this material are easy to blur together on a first pass. This section collects the ones most likely to cause confusion, each stated as a short contrast.

Craving vs. Desire in General

Not all desire is craving in the technical sense used here. The desire to practice, the desire to end suffering, the desire to understand — these are treated as part of the path, sometimes called "desire as a basis for power" elsewhere in the broader source work. Craving (tanha) refers specifically to the desire for further becoming or for non-becoming, the kind that keeps the causal chain of dependent co-arising running. The path uses one kind of desire to dismantle the other, and the path-supporting desire is itself finally released once it has done its job, the way a raft is set down after the crossing it was built for.

Non-Attachment vs. Agnosticism

As discussed above under right view, letting go of attachment to views is not the same as refusing to hold any view, or treating all positions as equally likely to be true. The four truths are affirmed as real. What is released is the psychological need to defend a position as part of one's identity, not the position itself.

The Aggregates vs. Clinging to the Aggregates

The five aggregates — form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness — are not themselves condemned as the source of suffering. They are simply the categories that describe experience. Suffering arises specifically from clinging to them, which is why an awakened person can go on experiencing form, feeling, and the rest without the clinging that would otherwise make that experience stressful.

Becoming vs. Birth

Becoming is the arising of a realm or dimension of experience (sensual, form-based, or formless) as a possibility — compared in the source to a dream image appearing to a drowsy mind. Birth is the further step of actually entering into and identifying with that possibility — compared to actually falling asleep and taking on a role within the dream. The distinction matters because it locates two separable moments where practice can intervene, rather than one single, indivisible event.

Cessation (the Third Truth) vs. the Goal Itself

The source is careful to distinguish the third noble truth — the cessation of craving, reached through fulfilling a duty — from the unfabricated goal that is found together with it but is not identical to it. The cessation of craving is itself still a fabricated achievement, part of the path's work; what it uncovers is entirely outside the fabricated realm altogether.

A Note on Using This Guide for Personal Practice

This guide is organized for reference, not necessarily for reading start to finish in one sitting. A reasonable way to use it in ongoing practice is to take one subsection — right view itself, or one of the four truths — as the focus for a

week or two of both sitting practice and daily reflection, reading the relevant essay and passage summaries slowly, and then noticing over the following days where the concepts show up unprompted in ordinary experience. The four truths in particular are meant to be applied to whatever is actually happening, not just studied as a set of propositions about experience in general; a useful test of whether a given passage has been understood is whether it changes how a specific, concrete moment of stress during the day gets met.

It is also worth resisting the temptation to treat the twelve-link formula of dependent co-arising as a puzzle to be solved once and filed away. The source is explicit that even advanced practitioners continue to find new layers in it, and that its difficulty is not a defect but a reflection of how genuinely intricate the causal texture of ordinary experience is. Returning to the same material repeatedly, with a calmer and more concentrated mind each time, is part of how the teaching is meant to be studied — not as a text to be finished, but as a set of questions to keep bringing back to direct experience for as long as that experience continues to include some measure of stress.

Finally, a caution echoed throughout the source material itself: none of this is meant to be taken on faith indefinitely. The tradition's own standard for whether any of it is worth continuing to practice is whether it demonstrably reduces stress, reduces unskillful reactivity, and increases the kind of clear-eyed, dispassionate awareness described throughout this guide. Where a given technique or framework fails that test in a person's own sustained experience, the appropriate response, by the logic of the material itself, is further honest investigation — not simply firmer insistence.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this teaching actually pessimistic, given that it starts with suffering?

The source argues no, and makes the case at some length in the discussion of the four truths above: starting from an honest diagnosis of a real problem is not pessimism if the diagnosis is in service of a complete cure. The comparison offered is to a doctor who has to name a disease accurately before treating it. What would actually count as pessimism, on this reading, is the more common view that suffering must simply be endured indefinitely alongside whatever pleasures come one's way — a resignation this teaching explicitly refuses to settle for.

Does "not-self" mean there is no person here at all?

The source does not frame the teaching this way. Not-self (anatta) is presented as a finding about the five aggregates specifically — none of them meets the criteria for a true, fully controllable self — rather than a metaphysical assertion that persons do not exist in any sense. The material is notably cautious about even the question "is there a self or not," treating it as one more instance of the being/non-being trap that right view is designed to sidestep rather than answer directly.

How is this different from simply accepting things as they are?

Acceptance in a loose, everyday sense can shade into passivity. The comprehension this material describes is active: it involves precise, sustained investigation of how a given experience is put together causally, aimed at actually dismantling the craving that sustains it, not merely tolerating the experience while leaving its causes untouched.

Why does the source spend so much time on twelve links of causation instead of just describing suffering directly?

Because the claim being made is a specific causal one — that suffering has identifiable, interruptible causes — rather than a vaguer observation that life contains hardship. The detail of the twelve-link formula is what turns that claim into something actionable: it specifies where, exactly, a practitioner can intervene, and distinguishes those points from links that cannot be interrupted because one factor is a sufficient (rather than merely necessary) cause of the next.

Is right view something one has, or something one does?

The material treats this as a false choice. Right view is described throughout as knowledge used in a particular way — a way of viewing (a doing) that depends on genuine understanding (a having). The emphasis throughout this guide on function over content is meant to resist the idea that right view could be reduced to a stored belief that plays no active role in how present experience is met.